THE WIFE OF STEFFEN TROMHOLT

VOLUME TWO

Hermann Sudermann

NAZARETH COLLEGE OF ROCHESTER

v.2 150613

Sudermann.
The wife of Steffen Tromholt.

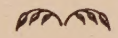
Learning Resources Center
Nazareth College of Rochester, N. Y.

THE WIFE OF STEFFEN TROMHOLT

The WIFE *of* STEFFEN TROMHOLT

BY HERMANN SUDERMANN

Translated by
EDEN *&* CEDAR PAUL



VOLUME TWO

New York

HORACE LIVERIGHT

1929

WITHDRAWN
NAZARETH COLLEGE

The German original, entitled *Die Frau des Steffen Tromholt,* was published in 1927, in a first edition of 20,000, by J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger, Stuttgart and Berlin.

Copyright, 1929,
By Horace Liveright, Inc.

All rights reserved.

150613

833.912
Sud

CONTENTS

PAGE

BOOK THREE: TRIBULATION 1

BOOK FOUR: THREE BY THEMSELVES . . . 227

BOOK FIVE: THE VICTRESS 337

Book Three
TRIBULATION

CHAPTER XX

Life went on its way.

This recent adventure, having carried Steffen to towering heights, receded into the background; he slowly descended from those altitudes, and not much remained over from his experience but a sensation of aimless vacuity.

Friends came to see him from time to time; from time to time he called on his friends—the same faces, the same stories, invariably the same. They were all disillusioned men; all of them mourned lost hopes; all of them looked askance at the ambitious and energetic members of the younger generation.

Their women folk, meanwhile, were engaged in the hopeless fight against oncoming age. Each endeavoured to hide the ravages which were revealed in the pitiless morning light as she sat before her mirror. She of the leathery and shrivelled skin would try to deal with her affliction by means of a fattening diet; she whose body was tending to obesity, would starve the opulent flesh into submission. Many grew peevish, many fretted themselves into melancholia. The spectre of the change of life stalked menacingly before them. Lovers—or, since such were not acknowledged in these circles, let us use the less scandalous appellation "admirers"—had to all intents and purposes vanished from their lives.

Those who continued the acquaintance on a platonic footing aroused the contempt of the others. And the women who had not yet resigned themselves to their fate were confronted by the triumphant smile of daughters setting forth on the path to victory.

Merciless, indeed, is the road that a woman travels between the years of forty and fifty!

One alone among all these women was untroubled by such tragic changes. Brigitte had long since renounced the wish for male admirers, had indeed never had to renounce it—for, her husband apart, such men as there were in the world had never been of any importance to her as males, had interested her only in virtue of their common humanity.

Moreover, the troubles of mortified vanity were an old, old story to her. For years she had looked upon herself as a back number, as one who could no longer hope for the world's acclamation. She was satisfied if her neighbours merely refrained from laughing at her.

Although her face had kept its youthful contours and bright colouring, her figure was so clumsy that she could not fail to be an object of derision to her acquaintances in the artistic world.

Yet they could admire modish oddities. If only she had possessed a snout, yes, one of those fashionable snouts such as that awful sculptor woman had—a woman who in spite of her vulgar nature and common face had been able to gather round her a host of friends and even had a salon of her own—

Brigitte might have passed muster, and might, even, have avoided giving her husband reason to be ashamed! But as things were she attended parties in fear and trembling, merely glancing over at Steffen from time to time, and collapsing with misery when she caught his critical eye fixed upon her. And when a group of whispering women would look her way and titter, her heart quailed with agonised torment.

Things went better, once the guests were seated round the dining table. At first, as they went in, the gentleman who offered her an arm might have a moment of repugnance, but no sooner had he and his neighbour begun to talk than he would forget everything except how charming the lady was whose artless conversation revealed her to be a keen observer and a shrewd though homely thinker. If he happened to be a man of solid worth, he would find so much pleasure in her converse that all the other ladies were soon forgotten.

How proud was Brigitte when, the meal over, her partner at the dining table would make a point of telling Steffen what a delightful and entertaining hour he had spent.

But usually, as soon as the company rose from table, her sufferings would begin anew. For the most part she would sit forgotten in a retired corner of the drawing-room, feeling too shy to accost any of the groups. As for hoping that people would take pity on her and come over to form a circle

round her, she knew she had been too long out of society life now, and expected no such sacrifice on her behalf.

Was it possible to believe that a woman who, ten years earlier, had been looked upon as an ornament of Berlin society, should now be sitting forsaken, one might almost say shunned, and taking no part in the prattle and the skirmishes? Sometimes, lest her loneliness should be too conspicuous, the host, or Steffen himself, would devote himself, and take a seat at her side.

It is not surprising that, in the circumstances, neither Brigitte nor Steffen could take much pleasure in social intercourse. Even he, man of the world though he was, found the strain irksome, so that in the end he, too, became embarrassed, not to say gawky, in society. They both determined, therefore, to rest content with the small circle of old friends, and only when the presence of some important patron of art came to reanimate Professor Tromholt's house, did the place scintillate once more in the way which had formerly been almost proverbial.

And all the while, the two girls put the months and the years behind them, and were advancing into the great world where love awaited them.

For Susi the day had already long since dawned; she was eighteen. She had the rosy tints of her mother on her high cheekbones, and a pair of dark, glowing eyes which, in conjunction with her pale-gold hair, made the dark youths of the Kurfürsten-

damm so wild with longing that they would follow her about in gangs.

But she ignored all these signs of hearts inflamed! She was not interested. If some one at a party began to pay court to her, she would turn her back on him. Indeed, she was loath to put in an appearance when there were callers; and often her step-father had to bring the weight of his authority to bear before she would consent to change from her blue house-frock into her best rose-coloured dress, and, blushing furiously, do the honours of the tea-urn.

She was a strange girl in other ways as well. Perhaps the years of exile in the Dresden boarding school were to blame, or, maybe, the ambiguity and uncertainty of her position as step-daughter in the house of a celebrated man was enough to account for her strangeness. Be the cause what it may, she had developed a strain of wilfulness in her nature that was provocative of taciturnity and suffering, and was due to a feeling of disdain which she was not always careful to hide at her first encounter with strangers.

She wanted to make herself independent of the luxurious way of living which had become a matter of course in the Tromholt household. Her mother had said to her: "You must never forget that some day you'll have to fend for yourself." Perhaps Brigitte's intentions had been of the best; but the result had been unfortunate, for these admonitions only strengthened the tendency to melancholy inherent in the girl from early childhood, and gave

her a feeling that life was to be a fierce struggle—surely an undesirable burden to impose upon poor Susi at this stage?

Since she was about equally talented for most of the arts, she decided in the end to take up music as the one least practised in her own household. Her choice fell on the piano, for her voice was no more than a sweet little twitter like that of a bird, and she had never so much as held a violin or other instrument in her hand.

Of course there was always a chance of her turning out to be a Frau Schumann or a Careño; and if not—well, she could give pianoforte lessons at a pinch.

Thus it happened that, one fine day, Steffen's house began to ring with the clamour of five-finger exercises; the sounds pierced through wall and roof, bringing him at times to the verge of desperation. But he loved the young thing far too tenderly to let a word of discouragement reach her ears. When of an evening she came to the supper-table, her forehead puckered, her cheeks hectic, her eyes burning, he would put his arms lovingly round her; and it was a joy to him to feel how she would instantly relax with a sigh, and find rest on his shoulder.

He was not a little worried to see how, since going to the Conservatoire, she had cold-shouldered all her erstwhile girl friends. If asked to give a reason, she would say that they were too fond of worldly things, too superficial, too preoccupied with

clothes and flirtations. She felt more and more that she belonged to those who have to take the shady side of life's road.

The first time Steffen heard her speak like this, a pang of self-reproach shot through his breast. Her homeless childhood was reaping its revenge, and was robbing her of the care-free joyousness that should now have filled her years. He resolved to make up to her in every possible way for what had been lacking in her earlier surroundings.

Brigitte, too, contemplated the recent developments with some concern. Nevertheless she favoured everything that spurred Susi on in the chosen field of activity. It seemed as if such bitterness as she was capable of (not much, to be sure, for harsh feelings of any sort were alien to her nature) inclined her to encourage her daughter in running counter to Steffen's wishes.

Once, when he drew her attention to the dangers of such a start in life, she answered: "You always eat up everything you come in contact with. Much better let the child do as she likes!"

So be it! Now the back rooms of the house were peopled by strange-looking individuals. Young men they were, down at heels, and with dark mufflers concealing greasy coat collars; mostly of Russian extraction, and of course each one carried the marshal's baton in his musical knapsack. Or young ladies with big spectacles and short hair, some severe of mien, others beginning to acquire the delicate curves of

womanhood; these with muddy complexions, those bright-cheeked; all aglow with the fever of youth. The corridor and back stairs leading to Susi's rooms (her friends did not care to come in at the front door) reeked of cigarette smoke and unwashed humanity.

They would stay for hours, having heated discussions which got on Mademoiselle's nerves and frightened Atta, who, in spite of her aversion to the rest of the company, clung desperately to the proximity of her elder sister.

Anything more absolutely unlike than these two girls was hardly imaginable. No one would even have believed they could be half-sisters. Susi, small, round, pale-blonde, with the paint-box colouring of her mother; Beata, already a head taller than the elder girl, willowy, with regular features and the lustreless skin usual in brunettes, her abundant dark locks gushing in waves down her back and reaching to her waist, forming a lovely framework for the narrow face. The only features she had inherited from her mother were her grey-blue eyes, which were not very large, but which could gaze at you so lovingly, in so friendly a fashion, just as Brigitte's did, and which were full of intelligence and full of dreams, so that when you looked deep into them you could not help asking: "How is this child going to grapple with life? She has no weapons of defence in her possession."

No weapons! Perhaps the daughter was even less

well armed for life's battle than the mother—whose innate cheerfulness had often helped her out of a difficulty. Beata was more at home among the mist-wreaths of fairyland than she was on this hard, rough earth. She loved everything and everybody that came into contact with her, and was filled with grief and care when her feelings were not reciprocated.

Friends? Oh, yes; enough and to spare. They would crowd round her so long as there were eyes to observe them; otherwise the little minxes would prefer to whisper secrets among themselves, and would never try to understand the aspiring thoughts and feelings of the girl they called their friend.

Thus, in spite of her loving heart and her generous enthusiasms, she often found herself neglected and alone. In her solitude, she clung all the more persistently to her sister, although her child's heart would not for many years to come be able to share the interests of the elder girl.

No one seemed to be aware of Beata's need, not even Mademoiselle, who still kept a watchful and jealous eye on her young charge's spiritual development, and was well content to catch the crumbs of love which fell from the child's table.

And what about Mummy? Ah, Mummy represented all that was good, she was happiness personified, she was providence itself. One had but to creep up to her when one's heart was too full of tears to bear the pain any longer, and, laying one's head on

her bosom, one would there find perfect peace. But one could not burden her with all the sorrows which surcharged one's heart. That would not have been fair. Besides, sometimes the things that had seemed so weighty turned into foolishness as one spoke, and one felt ashamed at having worried so much about them.

Then there was that mysterious and terrible trouble which hung over the house ever since Mummy had had the attack at Neuheide after the fine party. When one thought of that, one's own small worries stuck in one's throat, and one felt they were too insignificant to confide.

Though many years had passed since that first paroxysm—five, six, seven, eight—still there never seemed to be an end to their onset. It was always the same. Mademoiselle would suddenly say:

"Il faut rester ici, chérie. Maman n'est pas à son aise aujourd'hui."

Ida, the young woman who had replaced Mi, and who vied with the latter in devotion and kindness, Ida would thrust her nice face, that was so quaintly Japanese in type, in at the door, her eyes streaming with tears, and would whisper to the young ladies, begging them to keep to their room and not to make any noise, for the mistress needed rest and quiet and was now going to bed. A few minutes would elapse, and then they would hear a shuffling sound and a tapping along the corridor, accompanied by

plaintive cries and moans, going in the direction of their parents' rooms.

If Beata hoped to find refuge and comfort in her sister's arms, she was doomed to disappointment, for Susi would stand disconsolate, staring into the void. Certainly Susi would kiss the younger girl and hug her, but that brought little solace. Besides, Susi would reiterate: "There, there, darling. We can do absolutely nothing. It's much better we should say nothing about it."

The person who suffered most, as was patent to all of them, was Steffen himself. True, he had to acknowledge that animosity towards him personally had vanished from the attacks, that neither in the unconscious nor in the subconscious was there any other feeling now than whole-hearted love for him. But the fact that she no longer bore him a grudge for the suffering he had caused her during these many years of their married life, was poor consolation indeed; and ever and again he brooded over the possibility of discovering some fresh platform whereon to rebuild his life and his creative activities.

Divorce? Of course there was always that eventuality. It had been in the air constantly; ever since the first twelve months were up, they had toyed with the idea. But they knew quite well that the strength and resolution to carry it into effect were lacking, had now been lacking for many a year. Besides, how could he have got on without her? She was all that

was left to him. Intensely as he disliked being seen with her in public, in the house she was his world. She was the love of his life, its substance, its very breath. He could not think one thought without her, so entirely had he become knit into unity with her being.

The whole question was: how to get her well. The nervous attacks were becoming more and ever more frequent.

Sanatorium? That went without saying. Two or three times a year she would visit some institution of the kind, coming home refreshed and a great deal better. But the improvement did not last long; and after the lapse of a few weeks, the old trouble returned.

Something drastic must be undertaken. The family doctor brought together the best neurologists for consultation, and the fiat went forth that the patient was to have a complete change of air and surroundings, that for a year she was to go away from home and live somewhere abroad. She was first of all to spend several months in a Swiss sanatorium, building up her health; when she had regained her strength, she was to travel, at first taking short trips, and, as she got stronger, the journeys might be extended. Between whiles, she was to return to the institution, treating it for the time being as her home.

Brigitte lent herself without opposition to everything that was planned on her behalf. She herself

had never fully realised the gravity of the attacks, for she usually passed into a trance-like condition as soon as they began; she fancied, therefore, that all these plans and decisions were rather ridiculous, and that those concerned were making much ado about nothing. But she had long since given up striving against the decrees of fate, and she bowed her head beneath its bludgeonings.

The patient still had sufficient strength to arrange matters for the comfort of her little household. Atta, who was now in the transition period between childhood and womanhood, and who needed a kindly and understanding eye over her, was to go to a school in Thuringia, a place famed for its efficient and up-to-date teaching methods. Susi was to stay at her step-father's side, to take her mother's place, to cheer him when he came tired and out of humour from the studio, to see that he ate enough, to read to him, to attend to his business correspondence; in a word, she was to play providence towards him in his daily life, thus following in Brigitte's footsteps.

CHAPTER XXI

One crystal-clear day in April Brigitte started on her travels, accompanied by Atta who was to be dropped on the way.

So kindly disposed was she, so great was her peace of mind, that the journey and the long absence from home held no terrors for her; indeed she was full of cheerful anticipation. She looked forward to the soft green of the mountain slopes, and the blossoms lying like snow along the boughs of the fruit trees and flowering shrubs. Her fair face with its aureole of golden hair smiled at Steffen from the window as the train bore her away, while he stood waving to her till the very last with one hand, as he clutched Susi's arm almost convulsively with the other.

"What will she be like when she returns to us?"

Susi made no answer.

"It's up to us to see that she finds everything at home just as she left it."

"Yes, Daddy," said the girl, looking with solemn eyes into his face. The two words sounded almost like a vow, so grave was her demeanour.

They separated on leaving the station, for he had a model coming, and Susi had to go to a lesson.

"It seems awfully strange when I come to think of it," he mused, as he watched her girlish form disappear; "this child is to constitute my world for a whole twelvemonth to come!"

They met again at luncheon, and she was careful to see that he ate enough (he so often forgot to finish his plate, and would rise from table with his hunger only half appeased, when his mind was full of some big piece of work). It seemed to him as he watched her presiding so demurely at his board, that she was really his Brigitte, twenty years younger, rejuvenated, as he had known her of yore.

The only difference was that he felt quite at ease, as he had never felt where Brigitte was concerned, for he had always been a little anxious on her account.

As soon as luncheon was finished, Susi would fetch his beechwood pipe, and would fill the bowl with tobacco, pressing the weed down with a cunning finger. But no sooner was the pipe well aglow than she would disappear.

This was rather disappointing, for the half hour after meals had always been Brigitte's special time for him. It was borne in on him that no matter how sweetly Susi might devote herself, nor however closely their lives were intertwined, the girl was a stranger; the tie of kinship was lacking, and he had hitherto been too self-centred to try to bridge the gulf between himself and her.

Well, he would have to make up for lost time. But first of all they must settle down to the new life.

Not so easy as might be thought, this shaking down together!

Days passed, and they had got no nearer to understanding one another.

Even after supper, Susi would retire to her room, and he was determined not to insist on her staying to keep him company. Anyway it was difficult to know what to talk about with her; and yet, not so very long ago, they would chatter away unconstrainedly for hours on end as they tramped through woods and fields together.

Solitude made him more poignantly aware than ever how greatly he had come to depend upon Brigitte. His friends, his colleagues, the women of his acquaintance—all led a shadowy existence so far as he was concerned, only coming out of obscurity from time to time to play their familiar parts. It seemed, even, that the sessions of the Artists' Society (he was still chairman) were held merely to provide him with an opportunity to polish his wits and lubricate the mechanism of speech. Such things never penetrated into his real life, and as he went home from the meeting he would forget all that had taken place or had been said.

Though a bachelor by conviction and temperament, he had become a married man, and far more exhaustively so than had those who had taken wedlock as a matter of course. The latter had been able to achieve a balance between the home and the outer world, had established a harmony between their personal aspirations and the new mode of life demanded of them as family men. He, on the con-

trary, had felt himself bound hand and foot; and had from the outset renounced all hope of regaining any separate existence for his own ego, apart from the expression of his personality in his work.

Thus he had withdrawn more and more from contact with the friends who might otherwise have been able, at this juncture, to help him reconstruct his world.

Not one house was there where he could feel sure of a welcome were he to drop in; not a restaurant table under which he could stretch his legs at ease with a few good comrades. Yet in the old days he had been one of the most tenacious of boon companions.

Since Brigitte's departure, he had felt at a loose end in the evenings when his day's work was done, and had, therefore, taken to roaming the streets till all hours of the night, pencil and paper ever ready should a subject crop up.

When he got back, he would see the light still burning in Susi's room, but he never ventured to disturb her. He could not have explained what held him back, for until recently he had always come knocking at her door if he saw she was still awake. She had invariably bid him "come in," and had never grudged him a seat on the edge of her bed.

None the less, the dear child's nearness saved him from a sense of loneliness. Her proximity, indeed, aroused an agreeable sort of tension, which shortened the hours of work, and did not pass into abeyance

even when he was sitting beside her, ostensibly quite at rest.

He soon put an end to her way of slipping out of the room directly a meal was finished. After luncheon he did not mind so much; but on wet evenings, when prowling round the streets was impossible, it was no joke for a man to sit staring at the lamp, racked by an aimless yearning.

Aimless? Yes, aimless indeed. For in his heart he well knew that he no longer desired Brigitte's presence.

Her child had taken her place. Her child, with her bright colouring, and from whose soul a breath of her goodness was wafted to him.

But there was a contributory factor to stimulate his interest in Susi—something over and above the specific heritage from her mother. There was the unconscious self-assurance of all-powerful youth, its atmosphere of repose and reserve, which influenced him in a thousand little ways, and daily furnished new riddles for his solution.

Never could he have imagined that he would find it at once so imperative and so difficult to win the confidence of an eighteen-year-old girl.

She came, she went, she chatted, she joked, she snuggled up to him, she allowed him to smooth her hair from her forehead and to kiss her cheek, she returned his caresses and endearments, and when she put her arm round his neck he felt that indeed she was a part of himself. Yet no sooner did the

door close behind her than he had to admit that she was not a whit nearer him than before, that she was, in truth, more of a stranger to him than the veriest stranger whom he might pass in the street.

He rather envied her companions, the young men and women who could smoke in her room and could ventilate their opinions on what they called their "outlook on the world," their "philosophy," but which was in reality nothing but an undigested mish-mash of half-understood phrases culled from books. She, too, must surely give vent to her opinions in such a company, must break down the doors of her reserves, doors whereon he knocked for admittance in vain.

And he was downright jealous of a certain circle of intimates which foregathered on specific afternoons in the week. As he passed along the corridor, he would hear men's voices, and men's fingers wringing music from the keys of the piano: on these occasions it was as if a dagger were piercing his heart.

Once, on some pretext or the other, he went in, to find picturesque groups occupying chairs and bed; these were the adepts of the secret conclave, numbering about half a dozen young people in all. You should have seen how they sprang to their feet as he entered! How they blushed or paled with emotion and dismay at his alarming presence! He, however, played the affable head of the household, the zealous artist full of understanding who, at bottom, relished bohemianism quite as much as they them-

selves. He had cigarettes brought, and some of his wonderful southern wine; told them of his own student days, hoping thereby to gain their confidence. But he could elicit nothing more than a few monosyllabic and reserved sentences, which made him feel acutely that he was a spoil-sport. After taking an exaggeratedly hearty farewell of them, he fancied as he closed the door that he heard a sigh of relief which politeness had held in check till his departure.

One of the party had attracted his attention; or, to be more accurate, he had noticed a pair of dark eyes, glowing like torches, set in a grimy, emaciated, huge-nosed visage. Maxel had had eyes like that when they were young men together, both aspiring to storm the heights. Of course Maxel had the same eyes to-day; but who was Maxel now? He had become a shadow, like all the others.

This young fellow must be very poor. He wore a flannel shirt, and very seedy trousers, baggy at the knees; and his face was covered with pimples. No, no! A young maid's fancy could not possibly be attracted by a creature like that.

If only the "creature" had not had eyes full of exultant joy and allurement. One with eyes like that could know no appeasement to his yearnings and aspirations. True, Maxel had succeeded in quenching the like fires during his career as a critic, for he had resolutely plucked out of his heart everything which did not fit into the mosaic of his business, everything which did not "pay"—yet how could an

outsider tell to what extent that little canaille of his was to blame, and the poor fellow would have her clinging to his heels for the remainder of his life!

Steffen could not rid himself of those eyes.

In the evening, when Susi and he were alone together, he tried very cautiously to find out something about them, or, rather, about the man to whom they belonged.

"Interesting lot of young people you've managed to get round you. I'm glad to have met them. Mummy has told me a little about one or the other, but I'd like to hear more, and from your lips."

At first she hesitated.

"Oh, Daddy, there's not much to tell. They are gifted, each one of them, and they are as poor as church mice. It's impossible to know how they live on what they have; they probably could not tell you themselves."

"And the chap with the dark, ardent eyes—how goes the world with him?"

She did not blush, nor did she look in the least embarrassed as she lowered her eyes reflectively.

"I'm not quite sure which one you mean. They all have dark, ardent eyes."

He sighed, relieved. If she believed that, then the image of this particular man had not taken root in her heart. But how was that possible? She was certainly not blind. And the humanity in her was groping for the humanity in others.

Then she seemed to guess the one he was referring to.

"Perhaps you mean Sokoloff—'Boris Ivanovitch' the others call him. He's a dear fellow. But frightfully proud and masterful. His father is quite well off, rich, I believe; and because the father would not agree to let the boy study what he wanted, Sokoloff just ran away from home and refuses to take any help from his parents."

"Do you think he'll achieve anything?"

"Who can tell? He has offers from here, there, and everywhere, but he won't accept anything, because he does not consider he knows enough yet. That's all bosh, really. I look up to them as to beings from another world."

"She said 'them' and not 'him,'" Steffen noted with satisfaction.

Then, for the sake of saying something, he went on to ask about the girls.

"Of course they are much cleverer than I am," she rejoined; "and they are frightfully ambitious. But I am afraid that they are not quite so clever as they think. If enthusiasm could make up for want of ability, they'd probably reach their goal; but as things are . . ."

"What goal?"

She was somewhat at a loss.

"If only one knew! You must have felt it yourself in the struggle for success, that one may simply want to get ahead, without knowing exactly where

one is going. One just wants to be able to do more, and always more. But the end is hidden in the clouds."

She looked at him with eyes as full of enthusiasm as those of the girl friends she was talking about.

He thought: "I must keep better watch on her, or she, too, will be consumed with ambition."

Out loud, he said:

"Why should you bother, child? You know that I shall take care of you as long as I live, and provide for you afterwards. Surely you realise that you are just the same to me as my own flesh and blood?"

As he was saying this, he was aware of an inward monitor that accused him of lying. But she, as she looked at him piercingly, replied:

"I want to be independent."

He did not press the matter. He felt there had been a rebuff, and yet he enjoyed a sense of satisfaction, as if she had voiced something which he had lacked courage to utter.

Thenceforward he saw to it that she did not practise too long. He glanced at his watch when he heard her begin to play, and regulated his own working hours in accordance with the time he thought it expedient to allow her.

Then he would go down and tell her to stop, would if necessary pull her off the piano-stool with gentle force, would play the strict father, and insist upon her coming out with him for a walk.

Just as when she was still a half-grown girl fresh

from boarding school, they would stride over the fields amid which new streets were being laid out, and where the great city was stretching forth its tentacles to destroy the bushes and the trees.

On what was left of the grass, they would lie down to rest, and would look up dreamily at the clouds.

One or other of them would be sure to say:

"I wonder what Mummy is doing now?"

Yes, what would Mummy be doing now? Her letters gave plenty of information. She wrote regularly, to Steffen and to Susi turn and turn about, and phrasing her letters so that what was written for one of them would do for the other. Now and again, when she had something more or less private for either of them, she would write on a different kind of paper; but the recipients often exchanged these letters too, being delighted to learn how Mummy was secretly showing her devotion to each of them.

All her letters were instinct with the quiet cheerfulness which radiated from her wherever she was. She described her walks, the gymnastic exercises designed to make her thinner, her table companions, the doctors, the nurses, and the servants. An unending procession of pictures, amiable and smiling personalities, danced before their eyes.

"Our Mummy," he said, with a sigh of longing.

"Our Mummy," she responded softly.

As they lay, he would put an arm round her

shoulders, she would cuddle up against him, and quietly they would go on dreaming of Mummy.

Atta, too, wrote every Sunday, and they would have her letters to read over the breakfast table on Tuesday. But they did not exchange these letters. Daddy, indeed, might have handed his over, for they contained only what you would expect a dutiful daughter to write to her father; but the letters to Susi were full of lamentations for the lost home, the lost sister, and the lost Mummy.

As for what she wrote to Mademoiselle, who, now pupilless, was staying on as housekeeper and chaperon, that must remain a secret. The self-controlled Swiss governess compressed her lips and hid even the envelope.

There was one other member of the family of whom they thought, if not very often, yet still with affection. This was Kurt, who was preparing strenuously for his exit examination, and who intended as soon as he had passed it to devote his arduously won freedom to a spell of southern travel. His letters home had, in fact, ceased when his mother went away; a plain token that she was his only link with the family in Berlin.

But all these externals gradually faded from sight as contrasted with the living bond of intimate union between father and daughter—step-father and step-daughter.

The summer sun blazed down hotter day by day, the huge glass walls of the studio radiated heat, the

models found the long hours of posing more and more intolerable, and were glad when they could fling off the last rag that veiled their nakedness.

Steffen felt his hand slackening at its labours; and the cool seclusion of Neuheide allured him with greater persistence than it had ever done before.

But Susi declared she could not break off her lessons till the end of term, otherwise all her hard work would be wasted; and he, who had never bowed before any will but his own, docilely submitted to the young girl's pleasure.

They patiently awaited the moment when the treadmill would cease turning.

After nightfall, they would sit on the ivy-mantled balcony, keeping their distance for decorum's sake if they heard Mademoiselle's discreet step behind the glass doors. She would come to bid them good night as was her custom, and would cast a half-beseeching, half-threatening look at Susi, conveying a hint that it was long past bedtime.

At last the day came when they could leave the furnace that was Berlin, and bury themselves in the blissful freshness of Neuheide.

The faithful denizens of the old place made wry faces when they realised that their beloved mistress would not be coming this year; but when they were told that she was away for her health, and that her recovery depended upon her being in another climate, they reconciled themselves as best they could to the inevitable.

Susi had thought to replace her mother here as she had in Berlin, but she did not get beyond a few squabbles with the tenants' children, and soon the house resounded to the notes of the piano as she resumed her practice assiduously.

Late in the evening, however, when the moonlight spread its pale shroud over the meadows, and the thickset alley-ways in the park were darker than ever, Steffen would take Susi by the arm and lead her forth, wandering about with her in restless silence; or they would sit together on a bench gazing at the last flicker of the afterglow.

It happened, at times, that her head would sink on to his shoulder and she would fall asleep. Heaven knows how long she would slumber thus; and then, when she was no more than half-awake, he would drag her back to the house and her room, where she would tumble into bed, shivering with the night air.

They were not long alone. Atta rejoined them for the holidays a week after their arrival.

As she got down from the carriage, one could see that she had added a few inches to her stature, that she had developed, had almost left her childhood behind, though she was little more than thirteen, and her long, wavy hair was plaited in two orderly pig-tails.

Daddy got a respectful kiss on each cheek from her as she alighted; then she flung her arms passionately round Susi's neck; in the background stood

Mademoiselle, her lips wrinkled in a bitter-sweet smile, waiting patiently for her turn.

With Atta's coming, a new life filled the old house, which Susi's voice had not succeeded in arousing. Atta always had a train of animals following her; dogs, and goats, and doves; there were, besides, two fawns which the gamekeeper had brought up on the bottle, and which found in the child a protector.

Friends came, girls of her own age with plaits flapping down their backs, and with a touch already of that coquetry about them which Mother Eve bestows on all her daughters in the cradle.

"Daddy, do let's go and bathe."

"Oh, do let us, Herr Professor! Let's bathe! Let's bathe!"

At first he demurred, for he could not allow them to go alone to the lake, and an inexplicable shyness held him back from accompanying them himself.

He looked round at Susi, to see what she had to suggest. She smiled at him with an expression of motherly indulgence, as much as to say it would be all right; whereupon he nodded his approval.

Four, six, eight girlish arms flew round his neck; and that very afternoon, before the sun went down, the trap took the merry band to the sedge-guarded lake.

The ladies' cabin was far too small to accommodate such a crowd. So Steffen gave up the idea of a swim, and handed over the men's cabin to them as well.

He would be just as pleased to sit there looking on, his fingers busy with paper and chalks.

The west was afire with the glow from the sinking sun. The gold-blue waters of the lake seemed to be smeared with flames, and the reeds surrounded it like a wall of red-hot copper.

One girl after the other came out on to the little platform in front of the cabins, her limbs ruddy in the purple light; they clambered down the steps, and stood for a moment twiddling their toes at the water's edge.

Some of them, and Atta was of the number, were long-legged and thin; while others were beginning to show the curves natural to their age.

Susi, too, was with them. She cast rather a shy glance in his direction, and kept her bathing-cloak hugged round shoulders and hips.

His heart began to beat quicker, and when she dropped her cloak ready to spring into the water, the chalks nearly slipped from his fingers.

He had often seen her thus during the previous summer, had played and wrestled with her unperturbed. Yet now it seemed to him he was looking at her for the first time in his life. Those gently arched shoulders; the swell of the bosom, from which the boniness of childhood had vanished; the exquisite line of the back of the neck! Never before had these beauties of her maidenhood affected him so powerfully.

A voice within him was urging him: "Paint her, paint her! Quick, capture that which otherwise will be for ever hidden from the eye!"

Meanwhile the young fry were daring him from the water, dancing before the majesty of his throne, and splashing the crystalline drops towards him.

He laughed down at them, threatening the bevy of nymphs; but his real interest was centred upon Susi alone.

With long, deliberate strokes, she swam out to the middle of the lake, and soon she became no more than a tiny point amid the welter of flooding fire.

Suddenly, a feeling of anxiety seized him. He hollowed his hands round his mouth, and called to her: "Turn back!"

Obediently she did as he bade, and when she was near enough to be heard, she cried up to him:

"Why should I? We used to swim out much farther."

"But then I was with you," he answered with assumed severity, though he was really distressed by the note of vexation in her voice.

"God! What's happening to me?"

For the first time he realised that something terrible was taking place within him, and that danger lay ambushed in his path, a danger he must instantly face and conquer.

That same evening the merry rout went singing and giggling and screaming among the shrubberies and clearings.

Susi had begged to be left in peace upstairs. While he paced the darkling alley-ways, the strains of the *Moonlight Sonata* were wafted down to him from her room.

Some of the youngsters went carolling on their way just in front of where he stood. He missed Atta from the company.

Another group came to a halt before him. The girls had linked arms, forming a ring around him, and were trying to force him to turn back.

"Where is Atta?"

"Up to her tricks!"—"Put on her cap of invisibility."—"She's a way of vanishing like this."

They kept the pot a-boiling with whimsical comments.

"Let me go, then; I've something to say to her."

They pouted and fretted a little; then they let him through.

Where the dickens could she be? By a natural process of association, his thoughts of Susi had led him to think of Atta as well.

He went carefully from bush to bush, seeking for her as he went. He looked behind benches. Nowhere could he find her.

Suddenly, in passing by the ruins, he thought he heard a sound of sobbing from among the rose bushes.

There, on a crumbling piece of masonry, he could discern a little heap of misery—that was his child, his only child.

In the midst of all the jollification, she had crept away to ease her grief in solitude.

"Atta, little mousie, my darling, what's wrong with you?"

As he took her in his arms, he thought self-reproachfully: "You have a child of your own, and you know absolutely nothing about her."

Atta nestled up to him and rubbed her cheek against his, and her tears trickled warm down his neck.

"There now, pet, tell me all about it. What's the trouble?"

He had to ask her many times, before she opened her heart to him; a poor, forlorn, and homeless little heart to be sure.

"Mummy must come back! I want Mummy!"

"But, mousie darling, you know that Mummy is forbidden to come back. We are all missing her dreadfully, but we have simply got to be patient for a year. It's doctors' orders."

"Oh, dear! I can't bear it so long—a whole year! I shall die before the year is up." And again and again the same cry: "Mummy must come back! I want Mummy!"

He realised that the child's distress was verging on despair. He had often been told how dangerous any grave crisis could be for a girl at this period of her development, how, unless help was immediately forthcoming, her mental and physical balance might be seriously upset.

All at once the thought flashed into his mind: "She cannot come to us, it is true; but there's nothing to prevent our going to her."

He consoled his little daughter with this prospect, speaking gently and tenderly to her, and thinking the while: "In this way you'll be able to escape from yourself."

Next morning he wired to the neurologist who was supervising the course of the treatment from Berlin, asking whether he and the two girls might pay Brigitte a visit.

The answer was unqualified: "Excellent. Best thing possible."

He was furious with himself for not having thought of it sooner, and immediately set about making the necessary preparations.

It was not an easy matter to get rid of Atta's young friends, for they and their parents had counted on a visit lasting several weeks. Letters were exchanged and re-exchanged. At length, after many farewells, they steamed away to other heavens.

Atta was ashamed of her own joy, and tried to hide her tears of gladness and relief. Susi went about as in a dream.

Brigitte must not be taken by surprise; that would have been very dangerous for her.

She was no longer at the sanatorium. She had gone away on a little journey, with strict injunctions to return as soon as she began to feel lonely.

Just now she happened to be in Glarus, and her

letters rang with the praises of icy pinnacles and snowclad mountains.

The message ran over the wires to her. The trio started on the journey.

Susi and Atta sat close together in an angle of the railway carriage, smiling contentedly at one another.

Steffen looked at Susi questioningly out of the corner of his eye. "Are you really so innocent? Has no spark of the fire you have kindled penetrated your heart?"

Ah, he longed for deliverance, for deliverance from himself; his whole soul craved for Brigitte.

CHAPTER XXII

What was Brigitte doing while these events were taking place in her home?

She had long since got to know the kind of atmosphere to expect in a sanatorium. She was familiar with the thoroughness of medical examinations, she knew all about the rules of such establishments, and the forced sociability of the inmates was an open book to her.

But this place was different from any she had visited before. Then, she had been no more than a bird of passage, a patient who, on entering, already reckoned up the day of her release. Now she was to strike root, and must cherish a feeling that she was at home in her new quarters.

With the unconcern natural to her, she adapted herself to the life that was forced upon her; and it never occurred to her not to make the best of it. Indeed, she tried to find out its most advantageous aspects.

The other patients were all of them in worse case than herself. Moreover, her native cheerfulness of disposition helped her considerably, and made her the recipient of her fellow sufferers' confidences. Soon a circle of devoted admirers formed itself round her, people who poured their afflictions into

her sympathetic ears, all of them hanging upon her lips for the words that would bring consolation and encouragement.

She gave what her heart had to give with spendthrift generosity. None left her without hope revived, none felt that she had failed in alleviating the pain that had been laid bare before her. Even when the complainant's insincerity was obvious, and another than she would have laughed and gone about her business, Brigitte could detect nothing but spiritual need; and though at times she could not but smile inwardly, there was never a trace of contempt or harshness in her secret amusement.

A kind of gratitude waxed within her, not merely because she felt that every one was spoiling her and appreciating her company, but also because she was aware that her mental horizon was widening, and that each successive day opened up new springs of knowledge and experience.

For years her imaginative faculty had been lying dormant; indeed, the only thing which had kept it from perishing entirely had been the interest she had taken in Steffen's work. Now her fancy took wing, and carried her away into a land of faëry where the spirits of mortal men could roam. It seemed to her that these spirits soared on pinions in a free sky, that they were like huge birds, so tame that they would settle of their own accord upon an outstretched hand, would allow themselves to be admired, and their plumage to be stroked.

The pictures her mind conjured up were so vivid that they often prevented her from sleeping; she would piece ideas together, probing, testing, to see how one story would arise spontaneously upon the foundations of another. Such new and strange things took birth in her mind that, had she tried to commit them all to paper merely in the broadest outline, she would have had occupation for a lifetime.

There was yet another thing, too, which helped to lift the oppressive weight that lay upon her spirit, and allowed her to breathe freely once more: she need no longer be ashamed of her appearance.

No one here followed her with mocking glances, none looked her up and down with mingled pity and repugnance. The rumour had gone round that she was suffering from heart trouble, and that it was on this account, as well as in the hope of restoring her figure to more seemly proportions, that she had come for treatment. In this place, her bodily troubles could arouse nothing but sympathy.

"Ah, if only Steffen could see how esteemed I am and how much they all love me," she often said to herself. "Perhaps instead of feeling wretched about me, he would actually be proud of me again."

The wish grew stronger as time went on, and gradually threatened to undermine her inner happiness.

Brigitte missed Susi, too; and her thoughts turned compassionately to Atta in exile. But no longing equalled her longing for Steffen.

He wrote, it is true, assiduously; nor were expressions of love lacking in his letters. Oh, no! She could in no way reproach him for neglect. And yet she felt that she was slipping more and more out of his life; that she was retreating into a pale and shadowy realm far removed from her loved ones; and in that realm there was nothing but home-sickness, the choking oppression of unshed tears, eyes burning with sleeplessness and staring into the void; it was a realm in which, full of useless expectation, she walked along a futile road, in the vain hope that thereon she might encounter the beloved; a realm in which she listened for every ring because it might be the presage of tidings; a realm in which a knock at the door would make her jump in alarm because it was not unlike another, and all too well known, knock.

She would sit very still in the pretty room with the painted ceiling the nicest room in the place—how gladly it had been put at her disposal!—and look through the cascade of yellow ramblers at the misty face of the moon, and hearken to the last twitterings of the birds as they dropped asleep in the bushes, while she softly repeated the verses which ripened in her brain. If these verses were beautiful, they would be repeated over and over again until they were known by heart; next morning, as soon as she awoke, they would come back into her mind, and they could be written down as if they had been "composed," and had not originated spontaneously.

But she did not always pass the hours of the gloaming alone.

The patients, it is true, were forbidden to visit one another after nightfall, for it was essential that they should quietly prepare for the night's rest. But the doctors made a late evening round as well as a morning one. Many a woman who could boast of a pretty face and a shapely figure would wait for hours, trembling and eager, till the spruce young assistant physician with the melancholy smile appeared in the doorway to ask the patient how she was feeling. Nor did it make any difference when the ladies realised that he was above temptation, and had a wife and two children in the second storey. Doctors exist for no other purpose than to submit to the amorous glances of disconsolate females, and all the worse for them if they fail to rise to the occasion!

Of course he came to see Brigitte as well; and since he was in very truth an agreeable and high-minded fellow who never said or did anything to disappoint her, he was made welcome.

When he had felt her pulse and had seen that the sleeping draught had been got ready and placed conveniently to the patient's hand, he would sit on the window-sill as if he had every intention of prolonging his visit for a while. Surely it was not an illusion to feel that he took pleasure in her society? Besides, loneliness was irksome, to say the least of it.

Gradually these talks between gloaming and night became a necessity to her.

Nor did the conversation confine itself to generalities. Like every one else who came in contact with Brigitte, he, too, felt what a sympathetic recipient for confidences he had discovered in her.

The wife upstairs hung like a brooding fate over his life. She was cold, she was crazy on dress, she was arrogant and never satisfied. Instead of helping him with his patients and presiding at table—an office that fell to her share quite naturally, seeing that the physician-in-chief was a widower—she refused to put in an appearance, and made fun of the "band of hysterics" which peopled the reception rooms. Thus he was daily becoming more lonely, and were it not for Frau Tromholt acting as his good genius he hardly knew how he could bear his lot.

Brigitte pooh-poohed such exaggeration.

"What can I do for you in fact? I can give you an hour in the evening—nothing more. Any one could do as much." Then to put an end to his solemnities, she said teasingly: "Indeed, I reproach myself for having taken you from the others, who are longing for a talk with you far more ardently than I do!"

He laughed, and deplored the dearth of men about the place, which put him in such an enviable position in relation to the ladies. All the more had he come to appreciate the fresh, clear atmosphere that surrounded her. Sometimes it seemed to him that he could only breathe comfortably in her presence.

This high-flown talk was likewise laughed off by Brigitte, although it did her good to know that the blessings she was able to bestow all unawares were so greatly prized.

Came an evening when the relation between the two took a new turn.

The moon was hanging low over the lake, making a ruddy pathway along the waters, nightingales were singing in the bushes, and the Marshal Niel roses were filling the air with fragrance.

All at once, in the midst of talking of quite other things, he slipped from his perch on the window-sill, and sank on to the floor at her side, clasping her waist in his hands and burying his face in her lap.

She was not in any way alarmed. She was too sure of herself and her own feeling for that. Nevertheless she was for a moment rather puzzled as to the best course to take.

"I'm not going to scold you, Doctor," she said softly, "but you must not let yourself go like this. Get up, and let's talk sensibly so that there may be no misunderstanding between us."

He obeyed instantly, and sat on the window-sill again looking at her like a culprit awaiting his sentence.

"Perhaps I should blame myself for having given you the opportunity for such foolish behaviour—and yet, how could I have foreseen anything of the sort? I am an elderly woman, ill and shapeless . . ."

"For me you are the sum total of all that is beautiful! You are the ideal of what a woman should be. That I've had the luck to make your acquaintance is the greatest good fortune life has brought me. And as far as your figure is concerned, Rubens . . ."

She burst into honest and hearty laughter.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear! Why, it's ten years at least since I heard anything about my Rubenesque charms —and in those days there may have been some truth in it. But since then I've become a perfect horror; and I've almost got used to people looking askance at my misshapen form. Don't, for heaven's sake, try to bamboozle me, or I shall have to start all my mortification of spirit again. I am honestly grateful to you for your affection; but my heart is fully engaged elsewhere, all my love is given to those who form my family circle. So we won't refer to this subject again, please. Good night!"

Therewith she held out a friendly hand. He felt utterly crushed as he bowed over it, and promptly left the room.

But, even for Brigitte, the matter was not yet at an end.

A strange feeling of elation pervaded her being, as though she were lying in a warm bath.

"If such a thing as that can still happen to me," she thought, "if somebody can love me, truly and honestly love me, then, maybe, Steffen too will be able to love me once more. Ah, how glorious life would be in that case!"

She became so immersed in her dream that she was genuinely sorry when the doctor did not come to see her the following evening. She was sorry for him, as well, for she knew what such an abstinence must be costing him.

Yet she did not dare to encourage him. So, on the whole, she preferred her own company, and merely awaited the moment when the duties of his office would once again bring him to her side.

The experience, however, was not without its fruits. The excitement wrought in her soul must find expression somehow and somewhere. A dozen stories had composed themselves around it in her brain, and now she felt that at least one of them must be written down on paper.

When she came up to her room after supper, instead of as usual sitting in the fading light, she switched on her writing-table lamp, and sat down to her task.

Oh, joy! The tormenting inhibition which had for so long hindered her writing was broken down at last, and her pen flew over the paper; image followed image in inspiring succession.

She had always held, indeed it was the fundamental principle of her life, that good arises even from the worst of bad things. She had, therefore, determined to keep an eye on the doctor's wife, to watch her opportunity, and to get into touch with the poor thing. Once or twice, while taking her constitutional, she had nodded to the lady from a distance,

and she felt convinced that, despite what the doctor had said, there was a chance that she might help to bring happiness into these two lives again.

One evening, as Brigitte sat writing in her room, there came a knock at the door, and on looking round she saw—not the doctor (who should have come to see her professionally that night) but the doctor's wife, whom she was at that moment trying to portray in an imaginative sketch.

Tall, emaciated, with red patches on her thin cheeks, the visitor instantly began to make fevered explanations to excuse her intrusion.

"I've heard such a lot about you, Frau Tromholt, from everybody—servants, patients, and, especially, from my husband, who is never weary of singing your praises. And so I thought that, perhaps, you could spare me a few minutes, for they tell me you never turn away from those who come to you with their troubles, but always speak kindly and helpfully."

Brigitte motioned her to a chair, and endeavoured to persuade her that the reports were overdrawn. But the doctor's lady was not to be dissuaded.

"You must radiate an extraordinary influence around you, and I don't see why I should not benefit by it too."

A sour little smile played about her mouth as she spoke. Was it wrung from her by admiration? Or did it arise from malice and jealousy?

"What attracts me to my fellow sufferers is not so

much the desire to be helpful, but an indefinable sense of pleasure at being able to open up ways to a fuller life for these unhappy people. In society one can hardly ever penetrate beneath the surface, and I can't help feeling a little envious of you when I remember that fate has placed you in this spiritual picture gallery where you are by rights at home."

The doctor's wife listened superciliously.

"It's the first I've heard about my position being an enviable one," she said with a shrug.

"Ah, if I were only you," cried Brigitte eagerly, "it would seem to me that our dear Lord had put me here as his representative on earth. Fancy being able to share in so many people's troubles! It must seem as if one were living a dozen lives at a time. What a rich life one could make for oneself out of it all!"

The doctor's wife bit her lips.

"I've never looked at the matter from that point of view," she said, staring before her; "it's always been the wretched side of my life that I've seen most clearly. Believe me or not, as you will, Frau Tromholt, my existence is a very dreary one."

The flood-gates were open, and she uttered a litany of complaints concerning her children, the rooms they had been given to live in, her husband, her loneliness, her lost youth, and threatening age. Every petty misery which had so long tortured and demeaned her, now flowed like a muddy stream into Brigitte's sympathetic ears.

Brigitte gave what comfort she could. But she did not revert to the possibility of the poor lady sharing more in the patients' lives. May it not have been precisely on this account that, a couple of days later, the doctor's wife came down to take her place at the head of the luncheon table? At all events, there she was, nodding a welcome to the assembled guests. From time to time she cast a look of satisfaction in Brigitte's direction, as much as to say: "What do you think of your pupil now?"

That same evening, the doctor resumed his visits to Brigitte's room. He felt her pulse, he saw after her sleeping draught, did everything in as professional a manner as possible. Brigitte, however, did not invite him to stay. As he was leaving he pressed a kiss on her hand, murmuring: "You miracle worker!"

Her life now resumed its peaceful course. The story she had begun was written to an end, and another story followed close upon it. Her one desire was to write, to write, to write. Head and hand had been so long in bonds that they could not enough respond, it would seem, to the delights of their new-won freedom.

But this fervour of composition began seriously to interfere with her sleep. The doctors took order about it, forbidding her write any more, so that she could only get on with her work surreptitiously.

Her heart sang within her, overflowing with love which, since it had no immediate object to squander

itself upon, became rather aimless. She had to keep a tight hand on herself when writing to Steffen, so that her letters might not bore him; Susi's emotions needed to be treated in a matter-of-fact style; Atta alone, with her reserved ardour of soul, might receive more impassioned epistles.

One day the physician-in-chief said:

"I regret to find that your stay here is no longer doing you the good I had hoped, Frau Tromholt. I shall, therefore, have to follow my Berlin colleague's advice, and send you travelling. The attacks on whose account you were mainly sent to me have not recurred, and I should advise you to go out and see the world for a while, and not to return here till you begin to weary of it. You should stay away at least until the fall."

Brigitte, a few days later, found herself, very much alone, in a hotel perched among the high Alps. The place was packed with summer visitors.

She felt doubly a stranger in her new surroundings, and watched from her solitary table the sorry antics and vanities of her fellow mortals. There were faded faces, hopeless and grey, and lassitude that no effort seemed able to disguise; there was sorrow, hidden away from the vulgar gaze, flaunting a joy that was tragically at variance; her eyes penetrated it all.

True, there was her own grief which flourished anew in the favourable surroundings. A wall of cloud rose up around her, behind which all that had

put fresh life into her heart sank away into oblivion. Everything took on a shadowy form, even her dear ones at home lost substance and corporeality. They were there, and yet they were not there. They could be wiped from her life, just as she herself had been expunged from theirs.

She went from one hotel to another.

Her choice fell upon ever smaller, ever quieter places, hostelries and inns where the guests would not constantly be ringing bells, and laughing and talking in the passages. Under such roofs surely she would find peace and quiet.

She wanted to feel quite dead, as if she were lying on the floor of the sea and looking up through the waters of her tomb to behold the sun and the stars.

And all the time, she wrote, and wrote. It was no longer she who guided the pen across the paper, but a good spirit who gave her everything and transcribed it unbeknownst upon the fair white sheet on the table before her. A spirit, whispering in her ear by day and by night: "You must be your very own self again."

If only this being-one's-own-self were not such a painful process. The being-lost-in-another was so easy, such a matter of course. But she had to be herself now, for she was all alone in the world.

Her pilgrimage in search of quiet at last brought her to Glarus, that quaint, humdrum, old-fashioned

town, which lies high and dry above the stream of indifferent travellers.

She found a little inn to her taste, where she was the solitary guest; she fed the pigeons in the market-place, talked to the horses as they were being unharnessed, and allowed mine host's children to climb on to her knees.

She was writing the story of a consumptive woman who, from having lived so long in the mountains, had become a complete stranger to her native town, and who preferred death to returning among her own people again.

When she was weary of scribbling, she would fold her hands in her lap and gaze up at the Glärnisch, dreaming of falling asleep on those heights, bathed in sunlight and icy cold air.

Late one afternoon, she received a wire:

"Coming. Expect us at Glarus. Love.

"Steffen, Susi, Atta."

After the first fit of joyful weeping had passed, she experienced a most unaccountable feeling of anxiety.

Those three belonged together, they were life itself, the world, from which she had been excluded to die a lonesome death. How was she going to meet them, she who had no further share in anything at all, took no interest in the things which stirred their souls? Nothing more to do with Steffen's work. Nothing to do with Susi's aspirations.

Maybe she could sympathise with Atta's girlish troubles, but only from a great distance, like a departed spirit looking in for a moment at the window.

One night—one day—and again a night went by.

Now they would be coming. She met every train, the one which arrived at noon, and the others, the two o'clock and the four o'clock.

"Mummy, Mummy, Mummy!"

It was Atta's high-pitched voice. Handkerchiefs and scarves waved from the carriage window, there were arms round her neck, four arms, and the girls were crying just as she was crying. Steffen stood in the background waiting for his turn to come; he was looking at her so affectionately; she did not deserve such loving looks, she was sure.

For days and days after their arrival, she remained shy, content to stroke the children's hair, tentatively; and when she ventured to touch Steffen, she would pluck back her hand as if she had put it in the fire.

He, too, was not as he had been. Tender and cheerful, oh, yes! One might almost have said he was assiduous in the way he sought her company, ardent indeed; but when he sat by her side, his eyes roved restlessly, he was on the alert for every sound, and often forgot to answer when she addressed him.

Towards Susi he was friendly and attentive in his manner; yet he did not appear to get on so very well with her for when Brigitte wanted to be alone with Atta—it was with Atta that she felt most at ease—

and suggested the other two should go for a walk, he always had some excuse handy and refused to go. At other times he would fuss round Susi even more than he did round Brigitte herself. One day they were picking flowers on a hillside when a bull arrived on the scene and showed signs of a nasty temper. Steffen quickly sprang in front of Susi, acting as a shield, until the girl had made good her escape by climbing over a wall. He laughed the matter off; but he kept on looking at her, and, for an hour or more, his face was as white as chalk.

A few days after arrival, Steffen had shifted the whole party on to higher ground, where, among the mountains, he could find picturesque spots to paint; and although he insisted that the landscape did not lend itself to anything really interesting in the way of pictures, that it was obvious and platitudinous, he never allowed a favourable light to go by unused.

Brigitte must always be at his side when he was at work, and if she strolled away for a minute, he would immediately call her back.

She was happy to be near him; how happy, she dared not say. Three steps from his easel, she would find a comfortable nook, and sit there sewing under the shade of an umbrella. From time to time she would throw in a word of advice, and was so bubbling over with contentment, it was difficult to believe that a short time before she had pictured herself a heroine who, from the depths of her great sorrow, had called upon death to come and deliver her.

And, to put a crown on her happiness, who should one day steal up behind her and fling strong arms about her, but a jolly youngster, sunburned and sinewy, with laughing eyes under a thatch of pale-gold hair! Who was he, an it please you? Kurt! None other than he. Who else in the whole world would have thought of giving her such a surprise?

The examination was successfully behind him, and, before starting on his travels, he had thought it would be pleasant to sun himself in the admiration of his own people.

But there was yet another reason for his coming.

He found that law was not congenial to him after all. He must become a painter, like Dad. His decision was taken because he held the profession of painter in high esteem; in fact, a more exalted profession did not exist so far as this world was concerned.

"But, my dear boy, I've never so much as seen you with a pencil in your hand. When you try to make a circle, it usually turns out to be a square," exclaimed Steffen.

"Aha, Dad; you just wait a minute!"

Kurt ran off to his room, and came back with a vast portfolio under his arm. The thing was so Brobdingnagian that it had been brought as a separate parcel.

When the portfolio was opened, there were all kinds of drawings to be seen, heads, landscapes, interiors, faultless so far as perspective was concerned,

some done in pastels such as Dad loved, some in water colour, rather blotchy it is true, but good enough to reveal feeling and atmosphere.

Steffen looked first at the drawings and then at their creator; his eyes were big with astonishment. The youngster stood before him on his short, sturdy legs, very resolute, and yet trying to look both modest and indifferent. He glanced up at his step-father with a sly twinkle in his eyes, tremendously pleased with himself for the shock he was giving.

Meanwhile Steffen was thinking: "And here have I been neglecting the lad even more than the others; yet he has become a son after my own heart. I don't deserve it."

Brigitte was overwhelmed with happiness. She hugged her boy to her motherly bosom; was never tired of singing his praises; and her eyes shone with a hymn of thanksgiving because everything was working out so well.

A family conclave was held, to decide what was best to be done, and where Kurt should start his studies.

He did not wish to work under his step-father, as sons had done of yore, for he desired to develop his talents in the utmost freedom. First, he would like to go to Munich; then to Paris; perhaps, even, to Rome—although journeying to the promised land of painters was no longer so greatly the fashion now as it had been. Then, when he had found himself, and only then, he'd come back to Berlin. Thus he

would avoid having the reproach flung at his head that he was no more than a base imitator of his step-father.

For the nonce, however, he was to stay with the family in the mountains; here his youthful talent could find encouragement, and he and Dad would vie with each other as rivals in the field of art.

One morning Atta joined them, her sketchbook and paintbox on knee, showing what she could do as fruit of the lessons she had been receiving in Gotha. Even Susi abandoned the old tin-kettle of a piano which had been good enough for five-finger exercises, and started drawing and colour washing with zeal. The quartet of them would sit for hours, silently working; it had become a positive rage with them all.

A very little encouragement, and even Brigitte would have joined the group. She did know something about it, for were there not, hidden away in the attic at home, certain oil paintings she had done in her teens and which had been the proud ornaments of the walls in her first home? But she was too modest to let her light shine before men. Besides her heart was wholly set on another issue. Paper and pencils were ready to her hand, and, while the others were away on their sketching expeditions, she had plenty of opportunity to continue weaving the web of her heroine's destiny.

Still, nothing ever came of it, for she had more than enough to do to see after her dear ones. She

brought them food and drink, saw that they were not chilly; she picked up the various articles they had dropped on the way, and, in response to a summons from each in turn, would pass from one masterpiece to the other, commenting, praising, enheartening—for she could not bring herself to carp under such joyous circumstances.

Not one of them was happier than Brigitte. Everything that belonged to her on this earth was needing her care, her encouragement, her protection; they wanted her; they basked in her proximity.

It was years since things had been so lovely. Forgotten now the fact that she, too, was a creator, that an inexhaustible spring of pictures and thoughts eddied in her brain, merely awaiting the right moment to burst out into the light of day. All this had become submerged in the floodtide of her love, from which her present felicity emerged like an isle of bliss.

Her eyes travelled proudly and contentedly from one dear head to the other, each sunk between the shoulders, from very diligence at the task: Kurt's pale-blond tousle, Atta's golden-brown wealth of wavy hair, Susi's almost silvery locks, Steffen's grizzled curls—she might stroke them all. And happy would she have been to do so, but she did not dare to disturb.

Often would she stand thus behind her painters, lost in hopes and dreams; no boding voice was there to tell her that, trembling in restless longing, flaming

in secret glances which were quickly quelled again from a sense of paternal responsibility, a danger was menacing her—might rob her of her little interlude of joy and crush out every scintilla of happiness.

CHAPTER XXIII

Late October.

Never before had Steffen been at Neuheide at this season of the year. As soon as the equinox had been heralded by its storms, as soon as autumntide began to lower its veils of fog and damp and cold, he and Brigitte would pack their trunks and go to their home in Berlin for the winter.

Since he was alone this year, he decided to prolong his stay till the very last days of autumn. He declared—and was half convinced of the truth of his own words—that great schemes were afoot and that he wanted quiet in order to work them out. But the actual state of affairs was rather different. Brigitte's presence had given him enough strength to avoid the danger which being alone with Susi entailed, and he wanted to stay away from the girl as long as was feasible.

Let the future be what it may. For the moment he must withdraw into himself, and see if he could not gain the control he so urgently needed before allowing his life to resume its ordinary course.

Those were wild weeks, and solitary ones.

He was alone in the great, gloomy house, for the servants were quartered in a detached wing which was almost a separate building.

So long as the light held, he worked. Every day he conceived of subjects that were inexpressibly lovely. Enough to let the brush travel with the colours over cartridge paper or canvas! Motley walls would arise as if by magic, purple curtains hanging between, golden cupolas rising into the blue of a misty background.

Even more lovely, perhaps, were the mists themselves, at the hour when the sunshine caught bushes and tree-tops in its light, and they stood out like small or large beacons from among the vaporous squadrons, so active and so queer in outline, that they seemed to be flaming and flickering as if they were genuine firebrands.

What a feast for eye and hand! Flaccid dreams would have been a crime at such moments.

But the evenings weighed heavy on his spirits, growing longer day by day. At six o'clock it was already dark. He filled out the time as best he might, looking through the estate accounts, trying to get up enthusiasm over the harvest. Supper was served at eight; and as soon as the meal was cleared away, the last link binding him to the world of his fellow men was broken.

Then would he prowl about the house, going from room to room. Big iron stoves burned in every room, sending forth a cheerful glow through their talc doors; and ceiling, walls, stairs, furniture, would merge into indefinable and spectral shapes in the half light. He swam through them all as if borne

along upon a fire cloud. Everything that was earthly faded away. Relieved from the burden of responsibility, encompassed by a sense of beneficial intoxication, buoyed up with hope, as if in an opium-eater's dream, he thrilled with narcotised ecstasy, and wandered for hours at a time up and down the hall, mounting the eighteen steps and descending them again, groping his way along the haunted corridors. Darkness lurked in shadowy corners ready to pounce upon him like a savage beast, and the pale moon shining through the window at the farther end seemed to him an eye full of malice glaring at him from afar.

What terrible hours were these! Never had he experienced such moments in the whole course of his life. Never would he have believed that he would stray so far from the walks of orderly and well-balanced mortals.

He tried to thrust unwholesome thoughts aside. Joy and pleasurable interest, soaring flights into the empyrean—those ought to govern his existence.

Only too well did he know that a culpable wish underlay these novel sensations; and, had he not known before, the chaos of pictures and images that unceasingly coursed through his fevered brain would have speedily enlightened him.

Loneliness had engendered his monstrous imaginings, and none the less they were the outcome of love.

At times he would cower in front of one of the stoves, staring through the transparent doors at the

flames; then he would resume his aimless meanderings through the house, till midnight struck, or even one or two in the morning.

At length, his eyes burning and his brain on fire, he would creep into the great four-poster bed, and lie there brooding and dreaming till daylight dribbled through the shutters.

Hardly a day passed that he did not write to Brigitte; daily her letters came to him. Without any preconcerted plan on their part, such an exchange had become habitual to them. Thus did letters fly from one to the other as if the twain were young lovers still.

He was careful, of course, not to disclose the real state of his mind to her. But he told her about the progress of his daily work, and described the beauties of his nocturnal wanderings.

Occasionally, however, he must have been indiscreet in what he wrote, or Brigitte's intimate knowledge of him must have enabled her to read between the lines. At any rate, she grew uneasy about his mode of life, begged him to return to town as soon as possible, and meanwhile sent him soporifics from her own store.

Nothing she could do from such a distance seemed to be of any avail.

What happened then?

One afternoon a hired carriage pulled up at the front door.

She whom he had wished to forget, she who was

the last person in the world he wanted to have at his side and whose company he nevertheless most ardently desired—Susi, had come to rejoin him.

Mummy had written to her, she said innocently, that poor Daddy was not feeling very well and that it was her duty to give up her lessons for the time being in order to be with him and see after him. So here she was, and she had no intention of leaving Neuheide until he himself decided to move.

What was he to do?

Simplicity itself! Set his teeth, and continue to play the loving father. Any other course would hurl him and her into the abyss.

What a peck of troubles ensued; what a medley of hopes and fears, of bliss and torment!

Like a thirsty man before a fenced-in spring, he gazed into her uncomprehending eyes, pulling himself together at the merest flicker of distress on her part. That which he must guard against with the utmost care was precisely the thing he most wildly longed for: to see comprehension dawning in her eyes, a glimmer of understanding of all that was seething within his soul.

Suppose she should turn away from him, shuddering? What if she should write to Mummy: "Take me away! It is not safe for me to stay with Daddy"? What then?

For the present he had himself well in hand. His eyes did not beseech, his voice sounded like the voice of a father; and both he and she were very busy.

Of a morning he would go off to the park with his painting gear; and as he settled himself down to work, he would hear her practising scales and arpeggios in her room upstairs.

But she was a true daughter of her mother, for, no matter how absorbed she might be in her studies, she would break off in order to carry him his cup of beef-tea in the middle of the morning, would retrieve the foot-sack he had impatiently kicked aside and insist upon his putting his feet in it to keep them warm.

Thus the daytime would pass peacefully away.

Danger threatened only at night.

The table would be cleared after supper, and the servant would say good night and withdraw. Then the nerve-racking situation was reproduced; Steffen and Susi were alone together; the lurking spectre would emerge from its hiding-place.

Into the shadowy darkness of the sitting-room, the big, bright stove would cast its lurid glare, looking for all the world like a man in shining armour spitting forth fire. And when, in the oppressive silence, the coals would fall down at the back of the grating, the sound would be as of the rattle of swords which had been motionless for centuries and were now clashing against one another anew.

The table lamp cast only a pale, milky glimmer, in contrast with the fiery ardours of the stove; and it was agreeable to snuggle up these cold evenings as close as possible to the warmth and to one another,

so as to form a united front against the slings and arrows of this world.

They would read from the same book, look at the same illustrations; when fatigue overtook them, they would sit shoulder to shoulder, cheek against cheek, and gradually fall asleep.

Or, rather, she would go to sleep. Steffen would let her nestle close to him, her head on his breast; and he accounted himself happy when he could caress her cheek, and press gentle kisses on her brow.

Quite different were these evenings from those they had passed together in the park a few months back. Now he had become aware of their mutual dependence, he was conscious of a gentle surrender, he recognised an eager affection.

When she awoke, and prepared to go up to bed, she would fling her arms round his neck in a tight embrace, and would kiss him on the mouth as she had not kissed him since her childhood's days.

It was even now no more than the kiss of a child, but it made his blood tingle like a draught of good wine, and, as if overcome with the might of it, he would sink back against the wall while she, full of anxiety on his account, would caress him and stroke him, saying:

"What's the matter, Daddy? Aren't you well?"

Her loving questions would persist, and her tender embraces continue, until he would push her away from him, and with a curt, "Good night" would hurry off to his room.

Later, he would stand for hours before her chamber door. Nothing prevented him from opening it. He knew she never locked herself in. Why should she? He was her natural protector, and need seek no pretext for going in. Enough, for her, that he should wish to sit on the edge of her bed, holding her hands in his!

But that door was never to be opened even though his erring feet drew him ofttimes before it as he rambled through the silent house.

For two weeks the happy and unhappy game was played, night after night. Then one morning Susi, on bringing him his letters, said:

"Daddy, I want to ask a great favour of you."

"Well, what is it?"

"Sokoloff has just written to say that there's an opening for him in a Russian town near our eastern frontier, and, since he is not likely to return for some time, he'd like to come and say good-bye to me. He does not want to make a nuisance of himself, and suggests we should meet at the station between trains. But it seems to me that, instead of sitting about in a sordid waiting-room, I might invite him out here. Will you let me do that, and would you mind having him fetched from the station and driven back to catch his train?"

It was as if a lance pierced him as he listened, and as if a voice called loudly in his ear: "Sokoloff! That's the man who will steal her away from you!"

But he was careful to hide his jealousy.

"Your friends are mine. If he cares to stay longer, he'll be made welcome, my dear."

She thanked him demurely, but would not hear of more than a between-trains visit.

"The poor fellow is so proud. At the merest thought of being a trouble to any one, he'd shun the house!"

Off she went, to write the invitation to her friend.

Two days later he arrived. Susi had made herself smart and pretty for the occasion, but Steffen behaved as if the young man's coming were a matter of complete indifference to him, excused himself on account of his work, and did not appear again till the soup was served on the luncheon table.

His memory had not played him false. Sokoloff was a poor specimen so far as physique was concerned. He had narrow shoulders, and a pinched, wan face, very much in need of a shave. But his eyes were inconceivably beautiful. His manners were shy and awkward; and Steffen could sympathise, for he had often, celebrity though he was, felt just the same when he found himself among strangers.

As host, he was all the more assiduous in his endeavours to make the young man feel at home, asking after his guest's prospects and wishing him luck in the new post.

"Unhappily, things are not so far advanced as that," said Sokoloff in a gentle, sad voice. "I've only been asked to present myself as a possible can-

didate. They are paying my travelling expenses, and may or may not appoint me."

"We ought to hope that they will not take you on, since it will take you so far away," said Steffen, with the suave courtesy proper to the occasion; and it seemed to him that he detected a slight smile of pleasure and gratitude in the corners of Susi's mouth.

Steffen asked some kindly questions, though his ulterior motive was to find out on what footing Sokoloff was with Susi.

All that came to light was what he knew already: Boris was a poor lad, twenty years of age, penniless, well-nigh friendless, out of grace with his family, entirely dependent upon his talents, which did not seem likely to gain recognition for some time to come, for even the post that now offered hung in the air for the time being.

This account tranquillised Steffen's anxiety a little; and when, luncheon over, he left the two young people to themselves, he comforted himself with the thought that this was no more than a youthful friendship such as occurs half a dozen times in a girl's life.

After tea, however, the picture changed.

Susi, obviously with the intention of showing off her guest to the best advantage, said as they rose from table:

"Daddy darling, won't you ask Herr Sokoloff to play something? I asked him; but he refused, because he feared he might be disturbing you."

With smiling alacrity, Steffen added his request to hers.

Susi quickly cleared the things which had accumulated on the grand piano, for she herself seldom used it, being content with the humbler instrument in her own room, a present Brigitte and Steffen had given her soon after her return home.

They opened up the lid, and Herr Sokoloff took his seat in front of the keyboard. His long fingers hovered over the ivories, his eyes looked like the eyes of a Christ about to work a miracle.

He began with Chopin. The sweet murmur of the *Fantasia* caressed Steffen's ears. Others could play as well as that, thought the master of the house. Then came Tshaikowsky's turn. Steffen did not know what this piece was, so Susi whispered the necessary information. Surly heroism and gentle melancholy were woven into the web of the music.

And then? What's this? Whence came these tones flying out of the piano-case? No Chopin ever wrote anything like this, nor Tshaikowsky either. Neither modern composer, nor classical. Slav, and yet not Slav. Maybe one of the most recent of composers, one who from nature's voices, from sea and wind and forest, conjured forth a world of inconceivable harmonies.

Steffen looked questioningly at Susi. She was sitting by the window, gazing dreamily out at the clouds in the western sky.

Then, quite suddenly, he knew: the music was the

player's own composition. And she, too, came to realise the same truth.

Envy, savage envy, shook him to the very fibres of his being: then he sank into the depths of despondency.

One who had such weapons in his arsenal, put all other comers at a disadvantage, especially when the rival was bordering on fifty, and had nothing better to recommend him than paternal rights.

The marvellous music went thrilling through the air. The dead instrument fluted and sang with human breath and human voice.

And the man who drew forth the sounds knew not for the moment who he was or where he was. He looked like a disembodied spirit, ready to spread wings which would carry him heavenward.

"We painters are the merest cattle compared to these tone-gods!" thought Steffen.

Yet even this divine inspiration came to an end at last.

The player rose; and once more he was Herr Sokoloff, poor little Herr Sokoloff, who was on his way to find a job as conductor in some distant town.

But Susi was still staring into the void.

The young Russian took his departure before supper-time had arrived, although his train was not due to pass till late at night. It seemed as if he could not shake the dust of this hospitable place quickly enough from his feet, could not soon enough relieve

himself of the incubus of a hospitality he had been forced to put up with for half a day and more.

And though the duo began afresh, the far-off guest sat between them, unbidden and unseen.

With tortuous questionings, Steffen sought to penetrate into the secrets of Susi's heart. Yet the things he gleaned were not worth the trouble he gave himself. Her friend felt terribly exhausted after his long spell of poverty and overwork, and he was afraid he was not going to be strong enough to take up the post that was offering.

"But what else can he do? He can't make a living here," said Steffen, as if, with this objection, he could keep the young man at bay.

"A genius must succeed," and in Susi's eyes there gleamed a spark which gave her face the same expression as had radiated from the young musician's countenance while he was playing.

"Genius, indeed," cried Steffen scornfully. "You take every second man you encounter for a genius. In the end he'll probably become an excellent piano-teacher!"

She raised her candid eyes to his face, and gazed at him in surprise.

"Did you not feel that he really is one?"

"Maybe he is. But I know too little about music to say how much is original and how much borrowed plumes. We are more chary of applying the word genius to men in my profession. I can't remember a single one among living painters to whom the name

has been applied, and yet there are not lacking great artists of the brush."

She sat silent, and he felt ashamed that he had brought his own personality into rivalry with that insignificant young cub's.

As the days passed, his jealousy increased.

True, the dreamy look gradually vanished from her eyes, but she was no longer the Susi she had been.

She was not on the defensive at all, but, unconcernedly as it were, kept aloof from him. She no longer fell asleep with her head pillowed on his shoulder; and when she petted him, it was, so it seemed to him, with a patronising air, that was baffling and painful in the extreme.

At last a day came when they were once more united.

Steffen had just completed a vast canvas of a beauty-spot in the park. He had caught the exquisite autumnal tints, and had given them the aspect of a luminous dream.

He was contemplating his work, thinking of those daubs of landscapes he had done soon after his marriage, and how Brigitte, with her unerring instinct, had brought him back to the right path. Just then Susi appeared, ready as usual to escort him back to the house, for night was falling.

She clapped her hands together in sheer delight.

"Oh, how lovely! How lovely," she cried rapturously.

"There, you see; one can do quite decent work even if one be not a genius," he teased.

Nonplussed, a trifle hurt, she tossed her head, saying:

"If you're not a genius, I should like to know who is?"

"I'm a worker and a craftsman, and am thoroughly content to be nothing more. But take heart, my dear, I'm in excellent company. The great ones of old did not wish to be anything more, or, rather, they did not know any better. Genius did not arise until the late Renaissance period, and, with the genius, the painter demigod came down to earth."

"Have you always had such thoughts about yourself?"

He reflected for a moment before replying.

"No, child. A beginner invariably likes to go driving on the clouds. Perhaps it is as well that he does. Otherwise the law of gravitation would keep him earthbound. Later on, when one has reached the summit of one's powers and realises that it is not a summit after all but, rather, a high tableland on which one wanders aimlessly without ever being able to attain greater altitudes, one becomes humble, and well content to be able to keep to the height one has already reached. When fate is kind enough to give one a companion who warns a fellow if he starts going downhill, then life has given all she ever promised."

How well she penetrated his thought, was revealed in her comment:

"If only Mummy were here!"

"Yes, darling," he said while his eyes travelled over the canvas, "it would be well if she were here."

Every time he put the finishing strokes to a picture, he felt the need of her presence.

And over and over again he missed her, in a hundred other ways. Even Susi's presence could not compensate for Brigitte's absence then. To-day it seemed almost as if she realised that she must replace her mother as best she might, for on the way home she referred again and again to his work, appraising the breadth of his ideas, the perfection of his technique, and the depth of his symbolism. The only thing she did not commend was his diligence, for she looked upon that as an attribute of lesser intrinsic worth and good for learners merely.

Smiling and satisfied, Steffen listened as she spoke; interrupting here and there, when he considered that her enthusiasm was making her err on the side of exaggeration. How good all this was, when for days he had had to rely entirely on his own insufficient self!

That evening, they again sat together in the warmth and glow of the stove, while the table lamp cast its pale, milky glimmer.

She nestled into his arm, stroked his cheek with gentle fingers, and lifted her mouth for a good-night kiss, like an innocent, affectionate child.

"Why are you trembling, Daddy?"

"Me, trembling? What nonsense!"

"Just look at your hands."

She took both his hands in hers and laid them in her lap. A wave of frenzy rushed over him, a wave so mighty that he could not withstand it. He flung his arms around her and drew her to him, covering her hair, her eyes, her cheeks, her neck, with quick, mad, burning kisses.

With closed eyes, she lay in his arms, making no effort to resist; but when, recovering his senses a little, he looked down anxiously, questioningly, into her face, he became aware of a pained, an almost tortured smile pulling down the corners of her mouth.

Alas, how could he explain his frenzied outburst? How make her regard it as no more than harmless eccentricity?

"You don't know how much you are to me, child," he stammered. "I live in constant dread that one day I shall lose you for ever."

She opened her eyes, and looked (to outward seeming, quite unperturbed) into his face.

"How should that happen?"

God be praised, she was not angry! Nor did she shudder in his embrace. Then there was still some hope left that what he had done could be as if it never had been.

If only she had not smiled in that baffling way; a pained, defenceless little smile, such as might have

been wrung from a slave who had abandoned herself to her master's arbitrary will.

Ah, but Susi was not defenceless! She lived here under his protection. And he would safeguard her, even if he had to engage in mortal combat with the desires of his own fiery blood.

"Darling, you are so much to me; so much! You yourself cannot measure the love I bear you. When the day comes for you to leave me, to get married, or for any other reason, I don't know how I shall get on without you."

"Mummy will be coming back," she said comfortingly.

"You and Mummy both belong to me. You and she seem to me two sides of the same being. Haven't you felt that, long since?"

She did not answer, but the enigmatic smile was still there, that smile he had never seen before, and it filled his heart with doubt and distress.

When she said good night, she offered him her lips as usual, but did this (so it seemed to him) with a timid expectancy, and he scarcely dared to touch them with his own.

That night he was sleepless, and by the time day dawned he was fixed in his determination to pack up at once and return with Susi to Berlin. Things could not be allowed to go on like this. Too unnerving was the air of the lonely islet on to which destiny had cast him and her together in this out-of-the-way corner of the world.

In the Berlin household there were other customs and other laws prevailing.

Steffen needed models for half a dozen pictures he had begun, and a number of portrait commissions had to be carried out.

Susi took up her lessons again, and tried by hard practice to compensate for the long interruption.

Excepting for the hour or two she spent at the Conservatoire, she was all day and every day at her piano; from early morning until ten o'clock at night (the rules of the house forbade practising later), the sound of the piano filled every room.

Even the daily walk was considered unnecessary, and Susi was not to be persuaded into going out.

Steffen saw her only at meal-times. Then she would sit opposite him with piercing eyes, jumping if he addressed her, and, when not actually engaged with knife and fork, playing five-finger exercises on the table. Directly after supper, she was off again to her room, to resume her practice. When, towards twelve, he came to say good night, he usually found her with flushed cheeks poring over books on musical theory.

His comment was invariably the same:

"You'll make yourself ill, my dear."

For all answer she would give him one of those pained, almost tortured smiles of hers, that cut him to the quick.

It was as if she wanted to make any slip on her part impossible, or as if she felt she could not save

herself too quickly from the poisonous atmosphere surrounding him.

Nevertheless she remained all the while a dutiful and affectionate daughter. But when either he fondled her or she caressed him (and such endearments were of rare occurrence now), always that enigmatical smile of hers would hover about her lips. Sometimes the smile would be a blend of pain and pity, wherein pity would predominate; but whether the pity was for him or for herself remained a mystery.

On the whole, he decided it was for him; and the thought mortified him beyond endurance.

Towards Christmas, Atta came home for the holidays. Again she had grown almost out of knowledge, and was so terribly good (she had just been confirmed!) that even Mademoiselle found her behaviour unreasonable in a girl so young. The kindly Swiss woman would say:

"Il ne fait pas exagérer, mon enfant. Trop de sagesse fait trop de bétise!"

But Atta was incapable of understanding these words of wisdom, so stuffed was her fourteen-year-old brain with precepts and incorruptible saintliness.

Steffen got both girls to sit for him, and he placed them with their arms intertwined among the gold and russet tints of the Neuheide park. The picture was finished, packed, and sent off to Brigitte, in time for her to place it under her little Christmas-tree.

She would not have to spend her yuletide all

alone, for Kurt had planned to pass the merry season with her.

Strange was the feeling among those who now formed the Tromholt household.

Mummy away, the girls perplexed as to their choice of presents, and the air surcharged with tension.

Even Atta, for all her innocence, felt that something was amiss.

"I wish Mummy were home again," she would complain, trying to swallow her tears. "The candles are burning so drearily, and everywhere I hear voices."

"What sort of voices?"

"I don't know, Daddy." She peered round into the corners. "But I'm always hearing them."

As soon as Atta had gone back to school, the same life of over-assiduous labour started anew.

For long, now, Steffen had slept hardly at all, and Susi looked as if she had seen a ghost. Quite unexpectedly, she would be her cheerful self once more, would sing as she went about the house, would play mad games with Atta's dog, and would smoke innumerable cigarettes from sheer excess of high spirits. But her joyousness did not strike deep, for almost as quickly as the merry mood had come, it would vanish again, and her eyes would resume their vacant stare.

Steffen tortured himself with the questions: "Does

she feel? Does she suspect? Does she know? Or does she just go on living in ignorance?"

How could she not know? Since that evening in Neuheide, the state of affairs must have become clear to her.

That would account for her strange smile . . . and for that pitying look . . .

Suppose it were more than pity?

Temptation, infamy, crime, all lay ambushed, ready to spring forth. Scandal would follow; then death.

Was there no salvation? What about deliberately seeking out some adventure that would distract him from this perpetual brooding?

That mine-owner's wife who had sat for her portrait last year, she would come if he called her. They had agreed that when she returned to Berlin in the winter she would resume her sittings, so that he might finish the picture. Just now she had time and leisure, for her husband was still away, and was not expected yet awhile.

Yesterday he had heard from her—no more than a waggish line or two, but enough to prove that she had not forgotten. . . . She had avoided putting up at the Adlon as she usually did; and, so as to pass unnoticed, had taken rooms in an insignificant hotel near the Anhalt Station. Four flights up, living like a commercial traveller who had to consider every penny he spent, would be at home if he let her know beforehand. . . .

He wrote:

"To-morrow afternoon at five."

Punctual to the minute, he climbed the four flights of stairs and arrived a little breathless before her door. The porter was absent from the hall below. At each landing there had been a glass door, usually open, which showed him a back stair made of iron and leading down into the yard.

A man was playing a hurdy-gurdy below; and each time Steffen reached a higher landing, the sounds would assail his ears with increased volume as if a voice from the abyss were sending forth a petition for help. Depressing kind of music to accompany a man on such a pilgrimage!

Arrived at the fourth landing he had an impulse to throw the poor wretch a dole.

He stepped out on to the back stair and looked down. It seemed he was gazing into the shaft of a well. The time appeared unending between the moment when he threw the coin over the balustrade and the moment when a slight clinking sound told him it had reached the ground.

Suddenly the thought occurred to him: "If I should follow that coin, all my troubles would be at an end."

Yes, that would set him free, would bring deliverance. That remained in the background, in reserve, as a last resort.

His step was considerably lighter as he turned about and went forward to his love adventure—and

surely that was a jollier prospect than a self-imposed death!

Nevertheless, it was not so jolly after all.

She stood there in her glory—tall, beautiful, a woman used to command, but capable of giving a man the most submissive of smiles. She had decked herself in all the bravery of love, and looked ready to cast convention shamelessly aside. Yet when he sat beside her on the couch, the sloped ceiling of the attic room rising like a wall of rock above his head, she suddenly threw herself on the floor at his feet—she, the gift-bestowing goddess—and, burying her face in her hands, she sobbed her heart out on his knee.

"I say! What on earth's the matter?"

She went on weeping.

He lifted her up, making her resume her seat by his side; he dried her tears; with all the arts of the connoisseur he talked to her, beseeching her to tell him her trouble. At length, as if she were throwing off a spell, she burst into her story.

She had fallen a prey to a fatal passion, and it was only in search of oblivion that she had called him to her side. An "automobile fan"—such was the expression she herself used—a Frenchman by birth, representing an Italian firm, very little education, but well-mannered, and handsome . . . handsome as a Roman emperor. Married, and all the women after him wherever he went. He had taken up with her as he might with the first street-walker who pre-

sented herself, and had dropped her again incontinently. She knew that he left her letters lying about, for she had received some back again with scornful comments written in the margin by his wife. But what was she to do? She was completely at the mercy of her passion. She wanted to put an end to the whole sordid business . . . fling herself over the balustrade into the yard . . .

"Ah, just the same as you," he said to himself.

Her case and his case: the same, even to the ultimate detail. He and she had scrapped the last vestiges of shame and dignity. Both were steering towards the same abyss.

Neither now gave a thought to the hour of love they had hoped to spend together. He dispensed what comfort he could; and all the while he was trying to master his own suffering.

But he saw no other resource than the paved courtyard below.

On his way home, he passed by a gunsmith's.

He went in, and bought a fine, blue-glinting revolver.

Then, well pleased, he let himself into his house. "Thus," he thought, "my exploded adventure has been some good after all."

That night, as he lay tossing and restless, his thoughts returned to his new means of salvation: his revolver. He took it from the drawer where it lay concealed; patted it, caressed it, thinking the while: "So long as you are there, what harm can assail me?"

As he composed himself for sleep, the weapon was still lying on the pillow, and when the cold steel touched his temple, a stream of tranquillity coursed through his veins, and flooded his entire body, so that ere long he fell into a peaceful slumber.

Henceforward, for weeks at a time, he could only find rest when his head was in contact with the hard, cool revolver. It was his last hope in his misery, a peaceful end, which seemed as chill as the earth itself.

About the same time he became aware that Susi's assiduity at her work was threatening grave results.

Her eyes were strained, her smile was more tortured, her hands and lids would twitch, and twitch again.

One day she completely collapsed. In the midst of her practice, she fell in a swoon from the piano-stool. Mademoiselle found her lying on the floor, cold and unconscious.

She was put to bed, and the family doctor declared her heart to be overstrained. No more work for the present. Months might have to elapse before she could touch the keys again.

Steffen passed hours, long hours, by her bedside, reading to her, looking at pictures with her, telling her pleasant tales. He did what he had never been known to do before: entirely abandoned his work, and did not utter a single complaint. His duties at Susi's bedside were of far greater importance than any work could be.

As soon as she was able to get about again, he went driving with her, and the March winds, boisterous enough to wake the dead from their graves, played about her cheeks.

Silently and pensively, they rolled along beneath the arching trees of the forest. He held her hand in his, and thought: "Thank God, that I can sit by her side with an easy conscience!"

A day came when she was well enough to go away for a change of air. She went to rejoin her mother. Where else could she go? Brigitte's arms had been stretched out yearningly towards the girl for a long time past. And he knew from experience the healing their embrace could bring. How often had he not found refuge and peace in those same arms!

Two months remained to complete Brigitte's year of exile. The mother and daughter would pass them in one another's company.

As soon as she returned, the old life could resume the even tenor of its way.

But could it? Did not a mortal sin lie like a huge obstacle between what had been and what was?

True, it was as yet no more than a sin in the realm of his thoughts; but might it not some day enter the world of fact, become a dread reality which would bring him and all those who were dependent upon him to perdition?

Again he stood on the platform as he had many months before when waving farewell to Brigitte and Atta. *She* had been at his side then. Now she was

going away; she, too, was leaving him behind. Into the widening distance the train carried her, his last memory of her face being the faint flicker of her woeful, tender smile.

CHAPTER XXIV

When Brigitte, her year's absence up, returned to the house in Berlin, there was no to-do at the station, no triumphal arch, no band of friends to shake her by the hand. Over the door of her home, some one had placed a little scroll with "Welcome" on it, framed in fir branches, and Steffen had had spring flowers sent from Neuheide to lend a cheerful note to her room. That was all.

The servants, somewhat shy and abashed, were assembled in the corridor; a few tears were shed; then the faces cleared, and a gleam of love sparkled in every eye.

How happy Brigitte was, to be sure! No one, not if you searched the whole world, was capable of so much enjoyment as she; and none knew better how to show delight to others, so that they, too, were infected with gladness whether they would or not.

Her paint-box colours were as fresh again as of yore, and her figure had fined down considerably.

Reserved and shy, Steffen strode along at her side; and his heart had not felt so light for countless days and weeks. A foolish idea haunted his brain that he would find comfort and tranquillity now she had come home, she, who was the last person in the world to whom he could disclose his present plight!

Her news? Susi was picking up nicely; indeed,

the girl was improving so rapidly that her mother had not scrupled to leave her in Switzerland alone. Of course at first Brigitte had been considerably worried, not so much on account of Susi's over-strained heart (that was better before ever she left Berlin) as because of the child's mental condition. She had been absent-minded, staring before her, with a look so woebegone one might imagine life had dealt hardly by her. She had never been fond of society, but now one needed all one's arts of cajolery to entice her into a drawing-room, to get her to mix with her fellow mortals, to make her tolerate even the most tentative of wooers.

Steffen said with assumed indifference:

"Thank God for that!"

But a feeling of bitterness gripped him by the throat.

"Still," Brigitte went on, "she has become far more cheerful since she heard from that young Russian friend of hers—you know, the one who came to see her last autumn when you were at Neuheide."

He said:

"Yes, yes; I remember him very well."

But his heart pounded away so distressingly that he felt quite weak, and had to lean against the door for support.

"I fancy he went to his own country to take a job as conductor, or something. He did not give any news of himself for months—at least so she told me."

"Yes, that's true," said Brigitte, who was peacefully unaware of his excitement. "Then, quite unexpectedly, a letter turned up—one you forwarded from here. He got the job all right; but he found he could not stomach the routine work, and so he came back after giving the post a few months' trial. He has saved quite a tidy sum out of music lessons, and is able to take a little holiday in Switzerland on the proceeds. His health is very bad, as you know. I expect they'll see one another while he is there."

Something was shrieking in his ear:

"He does not want to go to Switzerland, he only wants to go to her!"

With an assumption of calm, he said aloud:

"You speak so approvingly of the young man that it seems to me you would have no objection to a closer union between him and Susi."

Brigitte laughed her old cheerful laugh.

"I never thought of such a thing! All I want is to see the poor child freed from her present morbid thoughts: and any one who can put healthier and happier notions in her head is welcome. If this should mean having a little love affair—or a big one for all I care!—it would suit my book just as well. You need not pull such a wry face. All we, as parents, can do in the matter is to look on."

"I cannot rest content with such a rôle," he contended, endeavouring to conceal the fact that he was trembling all over—a trick his nerves had played him of late. "I know that, since I am not her real

father, I have no legal right to interpose my authority. At the same time I shall do my utmost to prevent her doing anything so rash as entering into such a union would imply."

"Susi tells me he has prospects of a brilliant future," said Brigitte pensively.

"Even if he be a budding Beethoven," Steffen cried, his voice becoming shrill and strident, "he's got to show his mettle first. I myself have been a young man; I, too, had nothing but my little bit of fanatical self-confidence—but do you fancy I should ever have ventured to drag another human being down to share my lot? It is yet to be seen whether he's not merely angling for the daughter of a famous man, because he believes that her father will not let her leave the paternal roof without a substantial dowry."

"Be good, Steffen dear! You are scourging yourself with imaginary evils. Hitherto there has not been the slightest hint that the two young people wish to join their lives. It's probably no more than a boy-and-girl friendship. There are so many like that. And if it is likely to rouse our Susi out of her depression, we can only be grateful, and must look on it as a blessing."

He could find no objection to this, and let the matter drop.

But his anxiety increased from day to day.

He is coming now! He is enquiring for her! She is hastening to meet him! What then? What then?

He won't be staying at her sanatorium—does not want to draw attention to himself or to her—besides, his means won't run to it—he'll choose a place near by—it will be easier for them to meet—she has but to go beyond the entrance gates, and they are together—they'll be taking long rambles, or sculling on the lake—the evenings get dark fairly early still—and if they—if they . . .

Oh, it was enough to send one crazy, to make one wish to bash one's head against the wall!

If only a fellow could sleep—sleep . . .

The revolver had lost its soporific virtue.

Certainty! That's what he wanted. Certainty! One must set a watch on them, the two culprits.

But how? How?

What about sending Mademoiselle as chaperon? That would seem a strange move to Brigitte, and he could hardly expect her to agree to it.

Ah, wait a minute! Had he not seen advertisements in the papers? Detectives! Every day he could read some such announcement as this: "Private enquiries conducted. Suspected persons kept under observation. Evidence necessary for divorce secured, etc."

His case was not exactly "divorce"! So he'd come under the heading "etc."

The main thing was to act promptly. No hesitation.

Begin at once! . . .

A stuffy entrance hall. A room which seemed a

legacy from grandma's day. Oval prints, silver-framed silhouettes. Plush armchairs. A bowl with gold-fish. . . .

"What can I do for you, Sir?"

A military-looking individual, with bristling moustache, bronzed face, and twinkling, mistrustful eyes. The typical criminal enquiry agent of popular fancy.

Yes, Steffen, too, was a kind of criminal, was he not? After explaining the case in hand, he declared that he would rather keep his name out of the business, as also the identity of the young lady towards whom he was acting as guardian.

"Must have some regard for the family—you understand!"

Oh, yes, of course the detectives understood very well. It really did not matter who the applicant might be; but a deposit proportional to the secrecy imposed would oblige . . .

The "proportional" payment was immediately forthcoming, and they proceeded to draw up a plan of campaign.

The gentleman himself had several rather important cases in hand, but, in view of the delicate nature of the present undertaking, necessitating as it did the very finest intelligence, he felt he could not leave the matter to any of his subordinates. No, he must deal with the affair in person, put his other engagements aside for the time being, and would take train to Constance as the most convenient centre from which to work. He would at once initiate en-

quiries as to the whereabouts of the person concerned, and would, immediately after ascertaining this preliminary, set himself to keep the aforesaid person under close observation. The client could rest assured of the most loyal service. Reports would be sent daily, either to a poste-restante address, or to this office, just as the visitor pleased.

Steffen agreed to using the office address, and thereupon the business was concluded and the investigation began.

First day: Herr Sokoloff is still here, but busied with preparations for an urgent departure, this necessitating a change in the plan of campaign.

Second day: Herr Sokoloff is travelling. Destination: Lindau on Lake Constance. Is being kept under observation from the adjoining compartment.

Third day: Nothing.

Fourth day: Nothing.

Fifth day: Herr Sokoloff has left Lindau by boat. Is being kept under careful observation.

Sixth day: On landing, by a skilful device, Herr Sokoloff managed to elude observation. Several Swiss agents have already been put on his trail. There can be no doubt that his whereabouts will be speedily discovered.

Seventh day: Thanks to my unrivalled experience in such matters, Herr Sokoloff has been tracked down. Has taken up his quarters in the "Golden Lamb" at Constance. Is visiting a sanatorium in the neighbourhood. For the moment, technical rea-

sons make it impossible to follow him into this institution. However, the necessary steps are being taken.

Eighth day: Herr Sokoloff meets a fair-haired young lady in front of the Island Hotel, and goes for a two-hour walk with her.

Ninth day: In the morning, and again in the afternoon, Herr Sokoloff goes out walking with the aforesaid young lady. Identified as Fräulein Susanne Senius. Is a patient at the sanatorium. Twenty years of age. Step-daughter of the celebrated painter Professor Tromholt of Berlin. Has been here two months, with her mother at first, now alone.

Tenth day: Herr Sokoloff goes on a steamboat excursion with the aforesaid young lady. Objective: Stein-on-the-Rhine. They return same afternoon. Appear to be on friendly terms, but there is no obvious intimacy.

Such had been the tenor of the reports received by Steffen day after day at the office of the private detective—he had scanned them to begin with in breathless expectation, and the later ones with a savage feeling of triumph. The day after he had read the tenth report, Brigitte came to him with an open letter in her hand, and, smiling somewhat ruefully, said:

"Just fancy, Susi has written in great delight to tell me that her friend has not merely been to pay her a short visit, but proposes to spend part of his

vacation in her company. They are seeing one another every day and to-morrow (she writes 'to-morrow,' but her letter is dated a day or two before the postmark, so I suppose its posting was delayed) they are planning an excursion together if the doctor approves."

At this, Steffen lost the remaining vestiges of common sense. An inner voice was shouting: "Triumph! Triumph!" The fiercer his wrath, the more convinced was he that he wore an armour of perfect self-control.

"Presumably the doctor must have approved," he said; "for the excursion of which you speak has actually taken place."

Watching Brigitte's eyes widen in amazement, he went on with a scornful smile:

"In case you would like to know, I may as well tell you that they have been by steamboat to Stein-on-the-Rhine, and that they got back safely."

"How on earth do you know all this?"

"Simply enough. I've had the pair of them watched."

"You've had them watched? But how? Who'll do that sort of thing?"

"I put a private detective on the young man's trail. No difficulty about that."

"Detective?" Brigitte burst out laughing. "What are you talking about? Are there really such people? I thought they only existed in third-rate novels."

"Well, you know better now."

"But do tell me, Steffen, why you have had this done. I simply can't understand."

During the many years they had lived together, he had grown familiar with Brigitte's various ways of expressing surprise, but never before had he seen the signs of such overwhelming astonishment as to-day.

His temper got the better of him:

"Why have I had it done? Because I won't let myself be made a fool of. Because I won't let the child go to the dogs. Because I want to keep her fate in my own hands. I won't let any one play about with me; I won't let any one trample on me. I like to see which way things are going. I shall interfere as long as it is in my power to do so. After that, I shall wash my hands of it."

She was thunderstruck, and as if paralysed for a while. Then, in great distress, she cried:

"Steffen, you must be ill."

He looked this way and that, as if in search of help and justification, and said:

"Why should you suppose me to be ill? Do you fancy that you must be quite well because you are prepared to let the girl throw herself away?"

She paid no heed to his rudeness. With an attempt to tranquillise him, she answered gently, speaking of Susi's timid and yet radiant cheerfulness (to him, the thought of that cheerfulness was a humiliation); and of her own wish to moderate the

girl's overstrained artistic impetus by restoring a healthy spiritual balance.

"Does it seem to you, then, that this musician who plumes himself on being a genius is likely to have a good influence in that way?"

"He will help her to grasp where she stands in her chosen profession, so that she will be able in future to keep within the limits of her powers." Then, smiling at him compassionately, she went on: "But the first thing you had better do is to send that agent of yours a wire telling him to make an end of his observations. They must cost a pretty penny, and as for what he has to tell you, we can learn it much more simply from Susi herself."

Spurred on by shame, he slunk away to the telegraph office.

But on every wall he glanced at, there seemed to be written in letters of flame: "Lost, lost, for ever lost."

That night the powers of hell were once more loosed against him. He tossed in agony and groaned, gagging his mouth with the sheet lest Brigitte should hear him.

She heard him nevertheless; or guessed that he was in grave trouble. As so often before, she stood at his bedside in this, his utmost need.

Her hand sought his, and drew him towards her.

"Come," she said; no other word. The one syllable worked like a charm to break down all resistance. Obediently, he followed her into the

neighbouring room, and as he lay enfolded in her arm, his head resting on her bosom, sheltered in the pleasant warmth of her body, he thought with a sigh of peaceful resignation: "This is a more comfortable pillow than a revolver."

Soon he fell asleep. Not the heavy sleep of a drug-taker, but the quiet, restful slumber which Brigitte knew so well how to bestow on him, during which his limbs relaxed, and from which he awoke refreshed and invigorated.

Nor did he open his eyes till the morning was well advanced. He found himself in the same position, with his wife gazing down at him, studying every line of his face, as if she would fain discover the riddle of the new trouble he was hiding from her.

"Does she suspect?"

Not once since her return had he asked himself the question, so sure was he of being able to keep his secret. Yet since he had given himself away by disclosing his mad scheme of espionage, she could hardly fail to have guessed what was amiss. The facts stared her too blatantly in the face to be ignored. She surely must be aware of the cause of his trouble.

If matters had got thus far, then, indeed, catastrophe threatened, and there would be no escape. . . .

These thoughts flashed through his brain as he watched her eyes, so full of solicitude for his welfare, scanning his face.

Yet no! There was no suspicion in those eyes; he read in them nothing but love and unselfish apprehension.

And even while he looked, her expression melted into a playful smile as she greeted his awakening.

In very truth, so pure was she, even in the utmost recesses of her being, that there was no corner left for distrust to find a dwelling. It might well be that she, the clear-sighted and sensitive, would show herself dull-witted when the alternative was to think the unthinkable.

Or was it that she was so shrewd and so self-controlled that she could know and hide what clamoured for disclosure and reprobation.

Often, during the days that followed, did Steffen Tromholt ask himself this question when he became conscious that she was managing him in the soothing and healing way which was an essential part of her nature.

She dealt with him as if he were a very sick man; for many weeks on end, she encompassed him with indefatigable care, spurring him into activity in regard to the work he had so long neglected, putting the brake on him when, all unexpectedly, he became exaggeratedly industrious, regulating his exercise, offering even to accompany him on his walks although she was still very sensitive about her appearance and feared lest she might bring him mortification as of yore.

Guests, too, were invited to the house—more fre-

quently than was wise in view of the delicate state of her nerves. She was happy, however, to find that the long spell of solitude had in no wise deprived him of his verve and sparkle in pleasant society.

When the visitors had gone, she extolled his prowess to the skies:

"I say, you were in splendid form to-day! And did you notice how the women had eyes for you alone? None of the men were as apt at repartee as you were. I felt so proud of you, my Steffen."

Even if his response was no more than a wan smile, she could see that he was flattered all the same; his courage began to revive, he took pleasure in the game of life again.

Yet a return to sanity from madness and degradation was far from easy.

When the day came round for Susi's letter to him —she wrote alternately to him and to Brigitte—he would be restless to the pitch of mania, becoming desperate if the postman failed to deliver it. Having at length received the expected missive, he would read the most extraordinary things in between the lines, and Brigitte had her work cut out to exorcise the fiends that peopled his imagination.

His jealousy knew no abatement. The Russian had long since returned to Berlin, Steffen had not needed a detective to inform him of that. He haunted the precincts of the young man's dwelling-place; aimlessly, senselessly, he would prowl around as if watching for the rival who had robbed him of

his sweetheart, as if by mere proximity he could make his enemy innocuous.

One blessing, at least, he could be grateful for: he need no longer hide his trouble.

Under cover of his parental authority he could talk, and talk, and talk, to his heart's content. Brigitte was always ready to listen, always ready to take counsel with him; and even when she disagreed, the difference of opinion acted beneficially.

There were already hints in Susi's letters that she hoped soon to be home again.

Now it was he who rose in opposition.

No, no; she must not come back, not for a long time yet, perhaps not at all. Why not continue her studies in Munich? Kurt was there. The brother and sister might set up house together. It was a jolly place to live in, gay, lively; and little by little, he hoped she might forget. . . .

He, too, might gradually come to forget. . . .

But that consideration he wisely kept to himself.

Brigitte, who for the most part yielded to his wishes, was this time positive in her rejection of any such plan.

The girl must come home; it was indeed essential that she should fight her battles out on the spot where the initial trouble had arisen. Then, with spirit enfranchised, she could pick up the threads of her life again.

While she spoke, Brigitte looked at him pensively as if she were not so much concerned with her own

flesh and blood as with another who was pusillanimously trying to evade the issue.

His objections were gradually overruled, and, as a compromise it was agreed that Susi should delay her return till the summer, when they would all meet again in Neuheide. Thus she would be kept out of the way of the Russian, who was still in Berlin.

Things being thus satisfactorily settled, Steffen suddenly changed his mind. Susi must expedite her return at all costs.

There was to be an atmosphere of festivity about her home-coming. The girl's two rooms at Neuheide were freshly papered and decorated, new furniture was ordered, white lacquer, to give a look of maidenly cheerfulness as one entered.

He himself had run down to Neuheide to supervise the arrangements. Brigitte followed a few days later.

When at last the place had settled down, with its servants, its dogs, its manifold boxes and trunks, when rooms had been aired, and cleaned, and arranged, when the whole mansion had been rendered gay with flowers as if for a wedding feast, then, and then only, might Susi arrive upon the scene.

Brigitte drove to meet her at the station; and, while the hours went slowly by, he strode along the walks he had paced last autumn, remembering and marvelling as he went; he recalled how he had mounted the stairs, only to come down them again; his mind went back to the moonlit passages, and he

recollected how he had gone round and round the hall like a caged lion, what time the glowing stove shrouded the corners and recesses in a purple tapestry.

Even now he felt the net he had himself contrived, hampering his movements. And yet he knew that the threatening danger had been overcome, and the call of his blood appeased. He knew he had risen from the dark night of his torment into the bright light of day, and that it was hardly possible for him to slip back again, for now he had a saving hand to hold him.

The front-door bell rang, and the carriage wheels crunched on the gravel drive.

She was standing up, ready to alight, his darling, his sweet one, on to whom all the passionate love that had lain dormant for so long was concentred. She called to him, and flew out of the carriage, straight into his arms.

"Daddy! Dear Daddy! Darling Daddy!"

He bent her rosy face back, that he might feast his eyes on it and look into her eyes. He saw a smile playing about her lips, wherein there was hardly a trace of that pained toleration; on the contrary, it expressed almost nothing but innocent joy and tenderness.

Ah, she was his own little Susi again; all would be well once more. And yet the old ardour flamed up anew in his heart. . . .

Now they were in the hall with its garlands, and

then in Susi's sitting-room all snowy white; and flowers, more and more flowers; wherever the eye wandered, there were flowers.

Like one in a dream of enchantment, Susi went the round, touching this, caressing that; now she would rush to her mother's arms, then she would fling herself upon his breast, uttering words of loving thanks.

Brigitte and Steffen stood hand in hand; and, in sudden revolt against all he had gone through, he said to himself: "I, love this child guiltily? How could I? She is no more than a child!"

Yet the heart-ache, the waves of hope and pain, that were constantly ebbing and flowing within him, were a sure sign that he loved her still, in spite of everything, he still loved her, still loved her—but now it was as if the seared wound of his passion had been anointed with a healing balm.

Days of quiet beatitude followed, days when they were together once more.

Brigitte looked on with a complacent smile.

There was no trace of misgiving, no sign of enquiry, in her limpid eyes. Had she taken a tragical view of the obvious intimacy which existed between the two, had she spied upon them, had she complained, or snuffed catastrophe in the air, Steffen's emotions might have taken a turn for the worse, and led them all into a far profounder abyss than the one from which Brigitte had just saved him. Now, however, he looked upon her as his sheet-anchor, his safeguard, his helpmate.

He was never satisfactorily clear in his mind as to whether she was really as innocent as she appeared, whether her essential chastity was so incorruptible that in very truth she looked upon such a sin as impossible; or, on the other hand, whether her heart in its wisdom had revealed to her what her intelligence would never have allowed her to understand.

He was just as baffled when he turned to consider Susi's reaction to the situation. Her whole soul went out to him, that was plain; she snuggled up close to him as she had done of old, and the bitter-sweet days of last winter seemed about to be re-enacted; yet at times that strange, pain-informed smile would again hover about her lips, and she would gaze askance into the distant prospect, into the void, as if a thought accurst lurked in the background over there.

She received letters—from whom he dared not enquire. The postbag was delivered every morning at the steward's office, and was sorted there. All that was addressed to master and mistress was brought up to the house forthwith.

Susi usually arranged matters so as to be occupied in the courtyard at this moment; she would waylay the lad with his packets of newspapers and letters; for some time thereafter, she was not to be seen—just as he had done once when . . . Away with such recollections!

Nothing had as yet been spoken openly between them. Such reserve was the only thing that had

made living together possible. But jealousy struck its fangs so deeply into his heart that he could restrain himself no longer. He felt he was bleeding to death!

"Tell me, Susi, why do you always find some pretext for being about when the lad brings up our letters? They will be delivered all right, you know. Can't you wait for yours, or do you want to keep them secret from your mother and me?"

A deep blush. Hesitation. Lowered eyelids.

Caught!

Then, with a straightforward and resolute manner she said:

"Daddy, I'd like to have a talk with you."

His heart leapt within him.

This was decisive; he realised it at once.

"I'm ready, child, whenever you like."

"Not here, Daddy. Let's go somewhere so that we can't be overheard."

"I'll order the trap, and we'll drive to the lake."

"That's splendid, Daddy."

Now they were in the boat, drifting on the silvery surface of the waters. Sunlight was flooding every corner; a solemn stillness brooded over the landscape; the only sound came from the reeds and rushes, which whispered softly on the sedgy marge.

He pulled out vigorously into the open, while a voice cried in his ear: "This is the hour when your dearest love will be taken from you."

She sat before him on the seat in the stern, manip-

ulating the tiller ropes, her lips compressed, her eyes fixed upon the toes of his boots.

He shipped the oars, and bent towards her.

"Now, tell me all about it."

"Well, Daddy, I think it will be best if I go straight to the point. I am going to be married."

"Going to be married! Without asking any one's advice? Why should we bother to have this talk then?"

"Please, Daddy dear, don't take what I am saying as undutiful and as lacking in affection. But in such cases one has to be one's own counsellor—especially when one expects to meet with opposition."

"How do you know you'll meet with opposition?"

"Oh, I just feel it in my bones."

"Well, who is the man?"

"You know very well who he is."

"That young Russian chap who came here last autumn?"

"Of course, he's the only man I know."

"Nonsense! You know plenty of young men, and among them there are some who would make you far happier than . . . But perhaps you have something more to tell me."

She took his hands in hers.

"Daddy darling, don't speak like that, please, please!"

He felt the extreme of misery clutching at his heart. But he told himself earnestly: "Don't be weak. Don't let her notice how grieved you are.

Better die, than let her become aware of what is going on within you."

"Look here, Daddy, I'm not making any progress with my studies. Either I am lacking in talent, or I am not strong enough. And I can't just sit about like a fine lady. I could not stand it. So in any case I shall have to leave home before long."

"What's the matter with home? Do you want to persuade yourself that you're not wanted, that you are only kept there on sufferance?"

She made no answer, but the sweetly pained smile played round her lips again, and that was answer enough.

He cursed himself because, after all, it was he who had forced her to seek a home elsewhere, among strangers.

But her next words seemed calculated to restore peace to his tortured soul.

"Oh, Daddy dear, that's not it at all. Life is far too jolly at home—that's just the trouble! You spoil me far more than you do Atta, and yet she has a higher claim. Only, you see, I . . ."

She hesitated.

"Now she'll speak," he thought; "she will tell me straight to my face . . ."

"Well? You . . ." His voice trembled; in truth his whole body was trembling with emotion.

Susi collected her forces with sudden resolution, and her words shot forth as from an automatic pistol.

"I must have an aim in life. I must have an aim

in life. There must be struggle in my life—and doom—and if one can't have any of one's own, then one must share what falls to another's lot. If one has not strength to climb the heights alone, one must find a companion who will drag one up with him, one who has already grown his wings . . ."

"And do you honestly believe that your friend has grown such wings?"

She nodded her head triumphantly, while a look of ecstasy glowed in her eyes. It was the same expression that had lingered in her face so long after her friend had left her in the autumn, and which had filled Steffen with rage and jealousy.

Both rage and jealousy were still alive in him; yet over and above these he felt a joy assuaging his heart, lifting the oppression from his mind: it was not he who was chasing her from under his roof. If she were not lying, then she really loved this man, had loved him all along; and his own troubles had cast but the palest shadow over her.

Or was he not clear-sighted enough to find his bearings in the turmoil of this young girl's soul, this poor young soul, aspiring to freedom and endeavouring to bring order into its existence?

However that might be, it was his plain course now to stifle every aberrant feeling in himself, and to be a loyal counsellor and protector to this wayward child of his. As he thus meditated, a wonderful calm pervaded him, a calm such as he could never have imagined possible.

"Won't you tell me something of his future prospects, my dear?"

"He hasn't any prospects at all!" She spoke proudly, as if all the treasures of the Indies had been laid at her feet. "He tells me he will accept absolutely nothing either from his own parents or from you. He has enough money to pay our passage to New York."

"And you think of marrying on that?"

"He says he only needs the right soil, and everything will grow of its own accord."

"What you are proposing to do is sheer madness, child."

"There's lots of madness in the air, Daddy!"

He crumpled up. Her eyes were so candid, he could discover no trace of a reproach, and yet, and yet . . . What else could she have been hinting at?

"Does Mummy know?" He hoped by this question to evade the issues implied in the other, more dangerous, one.

She shook her head.

"I wanted to talk the matter out with you first, because, you see, you are the head of the family."

He laughed rather shrilly, railing at himself inwardly:

"Head of the family, forsooth! Nice kind of head I am!"

Then aloud:

"Matters have taken such a turn that, in truth, I

have absolutely nothing to say. I'm not your guardian; and even if I were, my rights over you would soon count for nothing since you're nearly twenty-one. As step-father, I need not be consulted at all. Still, if you attach any value to my opinion, here it is: I would rather have my tongue cut out, than give my consent to such a marriage."

Dejection overwhelmed her; but it was plain from her expression that her resolve was unalterable.

Taking up the oars, in silence he rowed to shore.

Nor did they exchange a word on the drive home.

Not until they were already on the steps leading up to the front door did he say:

"In days to come, child, we shall be estranged; but promise me that, so long as we are together here below, you will feel kindly towards me."

Without answering in words, she flung her arms round his neck, and kissed him as though everything were as it had been in the old days.

Taking her head between his hands, and as if bidding her farewell for ever, he gazed at her long and poignantly. Then he said:

"You'd better go to Mummy now, and let her know how things are."

Turning his back on her, he went to the studio and shut himself in.

What was he to do? The revolver was lying on his desk. Had this happened to him in the previous winter, he would certainly have blown out his brains

then and there. Now, after weighing the fire-arm in his hand for a moment, he threw it aside with a mocking laugh.

That idea was over and done with. All that was left to him was the ghostly remnant of an uncontrolled illusion, and his amazement that he should still be alive and sane after it had been dispelled.

The gong sounded for luncheon. He ignored it, and took refuge in the farthest corner of the big room. His one desire to be alone.

But there was Brigitte, knocking gently at the door, and what could he do but let her in?

"Come," she said, taking him by the hand. "We must look things in the face. I know well enough, my darling Steffen, how sore you feel."

Her expression was one of pure compassion, although in verity she had more to suffer than he.

It was borne in on him that he owed his salvation to her. Over and over again, to her!

No confession was expected. No recrimination was spoken. Not a word of understanding or misunderstanding had been said to shame him by the utterance of what it was better to leave behind a veil. Only the faith which the purity of her intentions gave her in the purity of his; and, to crown all, the blessing of her presence, that serene presence which kept the evil spirits at bay.

Two months were to elapse before the wedding and the departure.

Though Brigitte might reconcile herself to the

inevitable, Steffen's determination was fixed, and no one who knew him would make a futile endeavour to secure his approval. Since Sokoloff had no thought of visiting his intended's house, he and Steffen were spared the discomfort of a meeting. It was taken as a matter of course that the step-father would not grace the marriage with his presence.

The ceremony was to take place in Hamburg, a few hours before sailing.

Brigitte was busied in providing a trousseau. Two or three trunks packed with dresses and underlinen were all she could give her daughter on the occasion: but the furnishing of these necessaries took time and thought. Susi, in this matter, complied with her mother's wishes. The pair went together to Berlin more than once, but when they returned Susi's manner seemed to imply that such details were no concern of hers. She wandered restlessly in the garden and the park, or pored over her books, and left them grudgingly when she was called away.

She did her best to keep the promise she had given to Steffen. There was never a suspicion of reproach, nor even a hint of alienation in her words. Often enough it seemed as if nothing had come between them; but circumlocutions and silences created a heavy atmosphere in which mutual confidence could no longer thrive.

For his part, he did his best to stifle the feelings which had consumed him for so long. Care for her future was to be his only concern; but even this

was a torment to him. He pictured her hungry, shelterless, a beggar woman wedded to a beggar, wandering in a strange land, and utterly beyond reach of his help—for there could be no question that the man with whom she was linking her fate would choose death by starvation both for himself and her, rather than seek aid from the detested adversary. Perhaps he might have made some secret provision to which she could have recourse later, in case of utmost need; but he was unwilling to do this, since it would have been tantamount to compliance.

Thus did he nurse his rancour.

Brigitte was fully aware of the conflict raging within him, but she no longer tried to soften his heart.

A few days only separated them from the hour of parting; and, as they sat at tea, she said:

"I've some final arrangements to make in Berlin, and would rather see after them myself. It will be better for Susi to stay behind; she can follow me later. You two have borne with each other so long, I take it you'll be able to put up with your own company for twenty-four hours or so!"

Steffen's heart seemed to stand still.

Alone with her! Once more, alone with her! What an unexpected joy!

"But she'll refuse," a voice cried within him. "She'll beg and pray on bended knee not to be delivered into my hands again."

He hung breathlessly on her words. Ah, there

was that pained and tender smile again, the smile with which she laid down her arms, thereby making both herself and him defenceless!

She searched his eyes tranquilly, and said:

"If you have no objection, Daddy, I'm sure I have none."

"And I," he added, outwardly as calm as she, "I certainly have no objection."

Brigitte laughed gayly, exclaiming:

"So that's all right, children. Try to love one another as long as possible."

She went off next morning. Two hands waved her a farewell. When they were quite alone, as alone as they had been during those November days, they hardly knew what to be at. They just stood there on the platform, long after the train had disappeared, and found no word to say.

At last Susi made an effort to break the silence.

"Are you going to do some painting? If so, I'd like to help carry your things."

How many countless times had she done this for him? Two arms and hands had never sufficed to manage all his gear. But he was disinclined to work.

"It's a shame to waste our precious time on that. Let's go into the forest, will you? And we'll find a comfortable nook."

"That's fine! You know that spot near the gamekeeper's lodge, where we used to go the year Atta was born? It's lovely there."

Her proposal suited him admirably. They went home to fetch rugs; for although the September sun was still ardent, the earth was damp and cold from the frosty nights.

They lay down in the whitish-grey moss. A purple haze softened the contours of the pines, which in all these years seemed hardly to have grown any taller. Their branches, bared of needles, were covered with tufts of old man's beard. Magpies chattered from tree to tree, casting big shadows as they hopped among the boughs; while not far away a pair of turtle-doves cooed softly to one another. This gentle cooing was the only propitiatory element amid the primitive and harsh and penurious landscape.

"So ugly, and yet so lovable," she said. "Neither the house, nor the park, nor yet even the farm or the lake, will be so much to me when I think of them as this desolate spot. It was here Mummy sat long ago beside the pram in which our living doll was lying. Young though I was then, I can remember the look in her eyes. Never have I seen any one with an expression so happy as hers was then."

His thoughts flew back to the year when he and Brigitte had first come together. A whole life had grown out of that union. If he had been able to screw himself up to a divorce, as he had wanted, he would never have known this happiness upon which he would have to feed in retrospect till the end of his days.

For indeed, what he was now experiencing was

happiness! Yesterday it had still seemed to him a torment and a crime; but to-day the relationship had been transfigured.

Turning over as he lay, and propping up his head with his hands, he looked at Susi, lying with half-closed eyes blinking at the sun.

When she noticed that he was gazing at her so intently, she was a trifle embarrassed, but smiled amiably as she enquired:

"What are you staring at, Daddy?"

"Let me stare my fill. I shan't get another sight of you for the rest of my life."

Two big tears rolled from under her lids.

His heart was racked. But in the pain there was now no element of bodily desire, and he would not have forgone the martyrdom at any price. It almost seemed as if she were his child once more, as she had been before the longing to possess her had scorched him.

Stretching out his hand, he stroked the hair back from her forehead, behind which it would have been impious to look for such thoughts as he had once craved to find there.

Thus he could even cease to turn over in his mind the question whether a secret understanding of what he felt for her was regulating her tolerance and her activities—a wonder in which hope and fear had been mingled.

The sound of the gong reverberating through house and park and wood summoned them to table.

They ate their meal in silence. Then they parted, to seek rest in the shelter of their rooms.

But he found lying down irksome, and ramped about the studio, and puffed at his pipe which had long since gone out. Each minute was a treasure wantonly squandered so long as they were not together. He felt sure she was sleeping as little as he.

Then he heard her voice saying: "If Master asks for me, tell him I've gone over to the farm to say good-bye."

She could not fail in this duty, he knew; and he guessed that she hoped to make the best use of her time now, so that when he was free they might spend every possible moment together.

At last the tea-bell rang. He found her in the hall, standing by the table. Ah, how often had she stood thus before, holding the teapot in one hand and the kettle of boiling water in the other, while the blue flame of the spirit lamp had leapt up as if trying to kiss her wrist, and the sunbeams through the window-pane had made her hair shine like an aureole.

To-day he was looking at the picture for the last time.

Her eyes were slightly reddened, and the traces of tears were on her cheeks.

"It was awfully touching the way they all clung to me. I'm sure I don't deserve it."

"You deserve it right enough, my dear. Only you don't realise, that's all. It's amazing how much

love can be showered on a person, and yet how utterly that same person may remain unaware of it!"

In lieu of answer, she went over to him, and cuddled up against him. But he, very tenderly, pushed her away, for her close proximity was almost too painful to endure.

"There's still the lake," she said, as she returned to the table and prepared to pour out the tea. "Then I'll have taken leave of everybody and everything."

He rang, and ordered the trap.

"Would you rather go alone?"

"No, no! Indeed I wouldn't," she cried, coaxingly; and he was glad, as if he were the recipient of a great gift.

The trap was already waiting at the door, and they were soon on the way.

The teams were trudging up and down the ploughlands leaving the freshly turned sods in their wake; heaps of weeds were sending blue smoke into the autumnal air, burnt offerings rising to the thrones of the gods.

Again the lake lay fiery red in the sunset rays; and, while the lad waited with the trap, Susi and Steffen rowed out into the chrome-yellow universe of light.

Mist-wreaths were rising from the surface of the waters, violet-tinted squadrons called forth by the chill evening air; not a sign of life was to be seen far and wide, save for a family of divers which

disappeared under the surface with a squeak and a splash of wings at the approach of the boat; the corks of a fishing-net bobbed up and down as they pulled by; a pair of herons swung slowly athwart the sky, their great curved pinions glinting and gleaming as they wheeled and were caught in the noose of the westering sun; the sheltering wall of sedges stood high and golden along the margin, while, in the shadowy depths beyond, the bullrushes were waving their white seed-pods in the air.

"Come, Daddy, we'll hide somewhere as I used to when I was a child—do you remember?"

Aye, he remembered well enough! For whole mornings she would vanish, and it was with reluctance that she would answer the call of the luncheon gong. Then she would appear with a sun-scorched face, having spent many hours lying in the dinghy lost among the reeds, a book for company.

They steered towards the wall of sedges, but nowhere could they find an entry, so thick was the growth.

He shipped the oars, and he let the boat drift along till they came to a clearing made for the wild-duck shooting.

Now they sat within the golden walls, so closely beset with reeds that the sky was well-nigh excluded by the arch of vegetation meeting overhead. No sound disturbed the quietude, till a warbler trilled its delicate evensong from a neighbouring clump of willows.

It seemed that they two were the only human beings left on earth, so infinite was their sense of solitude.

He brooded, his thoughts going back to the day when she had told him her plans for the future. Things had got no better since then; on the contrary, the worst he could have feared had faithfully come to pass.

And yet? He sat not so very far removed from her, peace abiding in his heart; the furies had been appeased by a calm resignation. What remained of hatred and bitterness was turned against the man who was filching her away. But, so long as she was here, with him, it was as if that other man were blotted from the book of life.

Her voice came to him from the stern where she sat:

"Daddy, darling."

"Yes, dear child?"

"Now that we are so alone, so absolutely by ourselves, I want . . . I would like . . ."

"Well, what is it, pet?"

"I want to thank you—for all the love—you have showered upon me—a love I shall never be able to repay . . ."

A scornful laugh choked him. "She's actually thanking me!" But the sound of her voice lingered so sweet in his ear, that his mood of self-mockery died down almost before it had been born.

"Don't, please don't," he exclaimed. He got no

further. He felt the tears starting to his eyes, so, seizing an oar, he pushed the boat into the open water and rowed rapidly to shore.

Night had come. Supper was over, and now they sat in the milky sheen of the lamp.

The stove was not lighted, so the room lacked the ardent glow which used to people the dark corners with ghostly shades.

"Would you like me to play something, Daddy?"

"Yes, if you like."

"No, if *you* like!"

Ah, if she only would. Speech was impossible between them, for the subject which lay nearest their hearts was a forbidden topic now.

She drew up the stool, and sat before the piano. First of all she played Schumann's *Scenes from Childhood;* then something of Chopin's; finally, the *Moonlight Sonata.*

The music conjured up that summer evening when he had been roaming about the park, and the self-same strains had floated down to him through the open window of her room; the night when he had sought Atta vainly behind bush and tree, finding her at last weeping her heart out amid a rampart of roses which concealed the ruins of a crumbling wall.

Atta! Where was she? She had dwindled to a shadowy form since his head and heart had been consumed in the brazier of his passion . . .

Susi played on and on. Each tone struck like a hammer on his aching breast.

How could she bear it!

In the end, she, too, could endure the pain of it no longer. Abruptly she left the instrument, flung her arms round his neck, said: "Good night, Daddy," with a sob in her throat, and disappeared.

He stood for long in front of her bedroom door, just as he had stood so many a night last autumn when a consciousness of guilt had restrained him from entering.

To-day, he might venture in. To-day, no flaming sword of doom flashed before his eyes. And yet his unruly heart beat higher.

At last he softly turned the handle. The door yielded. He went in.

She lay in the light of the blue-shaded reading lamp, propped up on the snowy pillows. Her long hair flowed in silvery ripples over her neck and down her arms.

As he appeared in the doorway, a joyous smile of welcome illuminated her face.

"Ah, how lovely of you to come! I don't believe I could ever have gone to sleep if you had not come!"

He sat him down on the edge of the bed. She took his right hand and laid it under her cheek, closing her eyes.

She lay as one asleep, while he thought:

"How blessed am I that I can sit here like this in all innocence."

Soon, it seemed, she really was asleep. Her muscles relaxed, her bosom rose and fell regularly as she breathed.

"What a nightmare it has all been," he mused, as the spectral shapes which had tormented him so long filed in an endless procession before his mental vision.

Cautiously, he loosed his hand and rose. He bent, and kissed her lightly on the brow. She turned with a little grunt of protest such as a sleep-drunken child might have uttered. But she did not wake.

He tiptoed from the room.

A shade of disappointment vanished as quickly as it had arisen, and the only sensation that was left in his heart was one of blissful gratitude. But he wanted some one to whom he could turn, to whom he could cling.

Whom else could he turn to in the whole wide world, save Brigitte?

CHAPTER XXV

Life resumed its ordinary course.

Susi's letters arrived at long intervals, and were always addressed to Mummy. Hardly a reference to him, till towards the close she would send him a conventional message. She described the wonders of the New World; but, so far as her own life was concerned, she was chary of words. "It's a hard struggle," she would write; "still, we are getting along pretty well." Such was the ever-recurring formula.

In the end, they grew accustomed to her taciturnity, though Brigitte became increasingly silent, and bowed her head more fervently than ever over her stitching, spending hours and hours at needlework when she should have been occupied with her story writing.

She felt too weary to devote herself to literary creation, and when Steffen chided her for her laziness, she said:

"Let me be, Steffen darling! It's quite as much as the house can bear to have one of us striving for immortal fame!"

Besides, she contended, there was always such a lot to do, what with servants and workmen coming for orders and interrupting constantly. It was simply impossible to get any peace to compose one's thoughts.

Nevertheless, though she might try to give her fancies the go-by as much as she pleased, they insisted upon having their will of her; and if, during the daytime, she succeeded in trampling them underfoot, they would take their revenge at night.

Since the state of her heart made it essential she should rest whenever possible, she slept on longer than he did of a morning. When, later, he came to ask how she was, and sat down near her bed, she would as often as not greet him with the words:

"I wrote a story last night."

"Tell me about it."

He knew from personal experience how essential it was for an artist to talk over the ideas that were seething in the brain, and he was invariably a ready listener. Thus he could in a small way repay her for all she had given him daily these many years.

She told her tale.

He understood enough about imaginative writing —had not she herself been his teacher?—to realise that these stories of hers were no empty prattle, no mere refurbishing of things she had read; this was something new, something freshly invented; a virgin soil that needed but to be tilled, and it would bring forth good fruit.

Nor was it a naked skeleton that she showed him.

She had already invested the dry bones with comely flesh, with blood and living sinews; and one animated figure followed another, while Steffen sat there full of wonder, and oblivious of his own work.

"You must write the thing down," he said as soon as she had finished.

"Very well, then; as soon as I am dressed," she would agree.

When he asked her later whether she had done as she had promised, there had always been something more important to do.

Next morning, the scene would be repeated:

"I stay, Steffen dear, I've got an idea for another story."

"What about the one you told me yesterday?"

"This is a better one; just listen."

But this one, too, was allowed to pass, and was forgotten, as so many of its fellows had been before.

Again, another morning it would be:

"Just fancy, Steffen, I have made up twelve stories!"

"Twelve? All in one night?"

"No, no! I've been thinking them out for a whole week. Last night the dozen was complete. Would you like to hear?"

He listened, and his wonder grew.

This was no marionette show, with puppets whose strings would jerk them into activity; here were spirits conjured up out of a spirit world; they were instinct with the breath of life, endowed with wisdom or with folly, and moving on their imaginary stage to form consecutive tales: primeval shadows, moulded into new shapes that had never been seen before.

And hovering over all this work of creation was a tenderly sad, yet joyous laughter—the genuine Brigitte brand of merriment.

"But I tell you, my dear, these things are too good to be lost. You have just got to set them down on paper—at least in outline."

"Yes, yes, of course. I'll do it later in the day."

And there matters stood.

When he scolded her for her remissness, she would say:

"I'll remember them right enough, never fear."

Yet she forgot them, just as she had forgotten all the other tales she had composed. Thus "the twelve stories" became a family saga, to which the Tromholts looked back with a sigh as to other pleasant happenings of the past.

Yes, her work of creation sank back into the void now, just as it had always done since she married. But she had a witness to her creative and imaginative capacity; and a better witness no one could ever hope to find.

Reginald Naschke, who among the vicissitudes of ever-changing fashions had nevertheless steered his bark into a comfortable haven, learned from a chance word dropped by Steffen that Brigitte had spent her year of absence in writing stories—somewhat furtively, it is true. He asked to be allowed a glance at them.

Two days after he had been given the manuscripts, he came to Steffen in a great state of excitement.

"By gosh, it's the stuff! She's great. And she sits there so mousy quiet, a chap would never believe she had it in her. Those things I used to publish for her were very nice and all that, but almost any one could have written 'em. This is the goods, I tell you. This is the work of a real fine woman. It'll put a new gilding on the name of Tromholt. 'Two sublime minds in one and the same family!' 'Genius, twin geniuses!' I can see the book going into ten editions, I tell you. How does that strike you?"

No one was more capable of feeling utterly abashed than Brigitte. She stole quietly from the room.

She was unaware of having written anything specially good. She had committed the six stories to paper, not to pass the time, but, rather, to give stable expression to the mood which had peopled her brain with fancies, and because in her solitude she craved for company of her own choosing.

They had no proper beginning or end; they were merely dreams, wish dreams, anxiety dreams, dreams of a love that in the real world was becoming less ardent day by day.

There was that consumptive woman who, by long sojourn in health resorts, had completely lost contact with home and as a stranger sought death in a strange land. And then there was the wanderer, who on another continent had acquired renown and wealth and wife and children, coming back to his birthplace, seeing once more the little shop where he had served

his apprenticeship and experienced his first love, finding everything unchanged, just as if he had never been away—a man who could not now be certain what was real and what was fancy in his life, who no longer knew to what environment he belonged. . . .

They were all more or less in the same vein, pictures brushed in with delicate strokes and colouring, a tender blend of laughter and of tears, which no one could fail to love.

When Naschke had betaken himself home, she said:

"It seems so strange that I of all people should have done anything worth while. I can't figure out how it got done. Yet at the time it went easily enough. They wrote themselves. To-day they are bringing me so much happiness, but they had their birth in pain."

"You sit down," he retorted, "and do the same again. There's nothing to stop you."

"I can't," she whispered.

"Why not? You've as many ideas as there are grains of sand on the sea-shore. Subjects simply flow from your finger-tips. You surely can find a couple of hours a day for quiet and work."

She looked at him with an expression of timid plaintiveness, as if she were asking his forgiveness; and a sense of guilt awakened in him.

"It's my fault she can't do the work," he thought. "One day there'll be nothing left of her talent but a lost life the more."

"And mine, too, is a lost life," he mused as he continued his meditations. "It has been ruined by conventionality and respectability, when all the while it wanted to soar into the free airs of heaven and dwell among the primeval growths of the wilderness."

As always when such thoughts assailed him, he rushed silently up the winding stair into his studio, locked himself in, and brooded for hours and hours in solitude.

Brigitte knew these moods of old; and she, who usually was allowed to go to him whenever she pleased, was careful never to approach his door when the black hag was riding him. At these times she, too, would withdraw into herself, and concoct plans that would rid him of her presence; then she would be alone at last, and would be able to set about her own work and would write day in day out until everything had been committed to paper, everything which now eddied and whirled in chaos and confusion through her brain so that the mind grew weary of the surfeit, and all slipped away from her memory like water into sand.

Thus it had been going on for years, and there seemed no way out, no way out at all.

The book of stories was published. It was not exactly a splendid production, but Naschke had made quite a presentable volume. On the jacket was an announcement—Naschke called it a publisher's blurb, and contended that it was in the most excellent

taste—drawing public attention to the great name of Tromholt, which so unexpectedly was now about to acquire fresh laurels.

Brigitte was unable to refuse this rather premature crown.

The press was very favourable, so that the preliminary trumpeting on the part of the publisher did not appear to have been out of place. Press-cuttings were showered into the house with every mail; all were full of praise, and some critics could not resist the temptation so good an opportunity offered of giving Steffen a few sly thrusts, reminding him that it was long since he had produced anything to which it was worth while making special reference.

Such comments poisoned all Brigitte's joy. She promptly hid the cuttings away; in the end she gave up reading them, for they only made her heart ache.

Although the book had a great success in the world of literature, there was nothing much to show for it among Brigitte's intimates and acquaintances; and when she recollected the looks of rapturous enthusiasm which, in the years of her social success, had greeted those mediocre efforts of her girlhood days, she was amazed at the feebleness of the impression created by the work of her maturity. Little did she dream that it made all the difference to have been a social beauty in those days, and that the part she had then played in the great world had rendered her a person worth the courting. Besides, her long silence had squeezed her out of the ranks of those

from whom great things are expected; she had become an outsider, one who, if she achieved anything unusual, could merely arouse a surprise which would very soon cool to indifference again, to make room for other interests among new claimants in the literary market-place. Thus her previous venture into authorship had been forgotten; and if her name were now mentioned by one of those who prided themselves on their up-to-date knowledge of current books, some one else would say: "Ah! I never knew she was a writer!" To which another would add contemptuously: "Well, she does not need to at all, from a money point of view!"

Even the friends who sought her counsel—for each of them she kept a special corner of her heart—seemed to be quite unaware of her literary performances. Since, therefore, she got no encouragement from any one, her talents went to sleep again, talents which, had they been given friendly sustenance, might have blossomed out into something healthy and vigorous.

Besides, new domestic duties were imposed on her, and these filled an already full day.

Atta had left school for good. She was sixteen and was now living at home.

A tall, lanky, flat-bosomed girl, with the big nose she had inherited from her father, and the kindly, sparkling eyes which were her mother's gift to her. She had no trace of Brigitte's bright colouring, for she was of a brunette complexion, and paled very quickly

if she got tired. Her hair, which had gone darker as she grew up, hung in two tidy plaits down her back, and she was always pondering how she should wear it when she was old enough to put it up.

But those days were still distant, and meanwhile she did not look forward to them at all, preferring to dwell in the congenial world she had built up around her, full of noble ideals and infinite quietude. She was still under the influence of her confirmation, although her piety took an ethical rather than a religious form, and found vent in a veritable orgy of excellent precepts.

When it was decided she should come and live at home, she made up her mind to be nothing but a dispenser of blessings to the whole household. The position of priestess floated before her mental vision, a priestess tending the sacred fire, and moving with dignified composure through the rooms given over to her care.

It was not difficult for her to make her dignity felt, for she possessed a rather condescending manner which went well with her statuesque proportions. And no one, watching her, nose in air and eyelids lowered, going about her daily business, could have guessed the abyss of shyness this proud demeanour masked. Indeed her whole assumption of arrogance might be likened to the intimidating attitude assumed by a devil's coach-horse when disturbed—an involuntary deception whose only aim is to hide the creature's utter defencelessness.

There was as a matter of fact no occasion for her to "dispense blessings" or to "tend" and "care" for any one or anything about the house. She had very little interest in what goes by the name of "household chores"; and if ever she came down from her sublime heights and offered to help, she found her services could easily be dispensed with, seeing that Mummy had attended to everything already. She never entered the kitchen, and if a sudden fit of hunger overtook her in the course of the morning, she would find that unseen hands had provided for her wants and had placed refreshment in the hall. Again, if she were in need of a clean frock or clean underwear, she had but to open a cupboard or a drawer, and there was everything to her hand as if by magic.

For the Tromholt household was an orderly one, Brigitte having personally trained her maids. Yet the mistress herself never seemed to have to raise a finger. All moved along on oiled wheels, and if there should be a hitch somewhere in the mechanism, she needed but to utter a reprimand half in jest and that would suffice to spur the domestics' ambitions to higher endeavours.

Mademoiselle had departed, had betaken herself to another situation, far, far away in the pampas of the Argentine republic. There was nothing for her to do in the Tromholts' household, and her conscientiousness and pride would not permit her to eat the bread of charity. Other subordinates, giving of

their service right willingly, had come; always the same thoroughness and obliging demeanour was the rule, but whether arising from a natural predisposition in the persons concerned or because Brigitte's intuitions were unerring, or because, in the sequel, she won over all her underlings by her kind smile, it is not for me to say.

In this compact, peaceful, well-ordered little world, there was not much for Atta to do, and she therefore remained aloof, dwelling in the kingdom of her fancy.

She wanted to write. Very well, she could write to her heart's content. "Only I must stipulate beforehand that I shall not have to listen to her girlish twaddle," said Steffen.

She wanted to play the fiddle. Very well, she could have lessons if she liked. "Only she must promise not to overdo her physical strength, as Susi did," said Steffen.

What about his own craft? The thought of painting lessons was so obnoxious to him that he insisted he must never know anything about them! Here, the enforced secrecy of the undertaking merely served as an added stimulus, for if Atta ever got on so well as to be able to show her father her work, his surprise would be recompense enough for all her pains.

Blessed with this threefold artistic activity, she roamed the heaven of her dreams; it was as if she were borne along in a chariot of cloud; petted by

Mummy; going in fear of Daddy, and radiant with happiness if he occasionally condescended to crack a joke with her.

Such times were few and far between. Tromholt withdrew himself more and more from the family circle, living with his own thoughts. Had it not been that his position as chairman of the Artists' Society forced him to rub shoulders with his fellow mortals now and again, he would have become a veritable hermit and a crank.

He was under the impression that his life was "stagnating"; or, rather, since in the realm of intellect no such thing as "stagnation" was possible, he must be rapidly going down hill.

Day and night, night and day, the old refrain dinned in his ears: "I am submerged in the slough of marriage—I've forfeited my freedom—I've wasted my chances of happiness— A milksop, that's what I've become— Worth nothing."

He was not blind to the charm of the spiritual pictures around him, nor was he deaf to the kindly voices of wife and daughter; Brigitte's counsel was still of inestimable worth to him; but the older she grew, the more matronly she became, the more hopelessly unchanged the circle of their friends and acquaintances remained, the more stereotyped the course of the years—the more soul-deadening became the conviction that never again was he going to be torn and shaken by some fresh inspiration from without, and carried to heights of creative activity.

He saw himself condemned to being content with craftsmanly skill, until the time came to steer his ship into death's harbour.

Death! Thank God for that! Outside of death there was nothing left worth living for.

CHAPTER XXVI

Yet before death threatened or old age clutched him, fate led him to the summit of a lofty peak, whence he was able to glimpse once more the land of heart's desire—the land he never expected to tread again. There it lay, radiant and full of promise before him.

And this is how matters came about. One day Brigitte said to him:

"My Stephenson, we must take order about you. Day by day I watch you becoming gloomier and more monosyllabic. As for your work, it's been falling off this long while now. I am not surprised that you never have a good word to say to me, for I know only too well how much I am to blame for everything. But I cannot undo what has already been done. I've told you many a time that you need but take your freedom in your own hands; that I shall put no obstacles in your way. Whenever it comes to the point, however, you grow irresolute, and put off deciding. Perhaps the auspicious moment for such a step has gone by, and we have grown so accustomed to one another that we could not part company now even if we tried. Still, it's not for me to make any decision on that count. But there's an intermediate course which I certainly may recommend. Pull your-

self together, dear, and go off somewhere on your own, a journey, anything you like."

"What good will travelling do me, I should like to know? My workshop is here, and I won't stir away from it."

"Your workshop is anywhere! Wherever you can work, there is your studio. It's ages since you have done any real work here. Why don't you do again now what you did a couple of months after our marriage when you simply could not stand my company any longer—go to Paris? This time you need not fear that a doctor's ukase will call you back untimely. I'll be good, and not fret while you are away, I promise. You'll be able to imagine you are a bachelor again—have love affairs—as many as you like! You know I am no longer jealous of other women where you are concerned. My body is not attractive, and for that side of love you must look elsewhere."

He scanned her face searchingly. Yes, she was serious. She had spoken like this before, but never so freely, so candidly, as if she had loosed herself from all earthly bonds.

Again he felt how utterly he belonged to her.

Of course it was not such a simple matter for him to get away. Even if he could seek out another spot for his work—Paris, or wherever the place might be—it was taking serious risks for him to forsake his house and hearth.

He had never, save for the year when Brigitte

had gone away for treatment, been parted from his wife since they came to settle in Berlin. Though her nervous attacks occurred but seldom now, and were less severe, she was not entirely free from them. Atta, hypersensitive as she was, could not be burdened with the responsibility of tending her mother at such times. As a child, she had already suffered greatly, and at her present age the shock might entail serious consequences. Among the servants, there was no one as clever as Mi had been in the management of the patient.

And yet—the thing must be attempted. He called on the family doctor, and talked over possibilities; he gave detailed instructions to the maids; he even tried to mitigate the terror he sensed in Atta's heart, by explaining to her just what her mother's paroxysms signified.

Then he went off on his travels.

To Paris, as Brigitte in her wisdom had advised.

He had not been there for inconceivable ages, not since he had taken Brigitte, to initiate her into the wonders of this sanctuary of art.

Fear had kept him away. Dread lest, in Paris, regret for the mess he had made of his life should become intolerable.

Now the enchantress was stretching her beloved arms once more towards him. He yielded to the lure.

The reek of charcoal was in the air as of yore, despite the new craze for central heating. In the

Rue Lafayette there was the dealer in antiques, with the same Louis XVI chairs he had known of old, with the Barye bronzes and the spurious Fragonards, or whatever the fellow's name was, the waggish master of rococo! And here were the oysters exposed for sale on the stalls, the dripping baskets in which they had been packed, cluttering the vendor's feet; and the cafés where the opalescent sheen of absinthe tempted the passer-by.

"Paris! Paris! Refuge of those whose hearts have been cramped by moral conventions and tortured by Teutonic philistinism! Why have I left you unvisited so long?"—Such was his unspoken thought.

La bohême had meanwhile lost its charms for him, and dens of iniquity no longer attracted our Steffen. He put up at the Ritz, where one dined of an evening in a boiled shirt and other ceremonial accoutrements, and where for breakfast one ate œufs à la coque beaten up in a glass with reverential care by a solemn maître d'hôtel.

Then he went forth on a voyage of discovery.

Who among old friends was still to be found? The Dane had never gone back to his country. He was actually here! After climbing many flights in the same old house in the Rue Gay-Lussac, high up under the eaves, he found the identical card sticking to the wall, blotched and faded, but legible in spite of the years:

Henrik Christensen

and in the right-hand bottom corner the word: Copenhague.

Yes, the old gentleman in the shabby velvet coat was really and truly he! The same curly Rubenesque beard, the same gesture as he hastily saddled his nose with his glasses in order to inspect his visitor, a look of suspicion in his eyes.

"Christensen!"

A gleam of recognition. Then, forgetful that they were no longer in Rome, a flood of Italian:

"Ma che c'è? Stefano, tu? Ragazzaccio! Mascalzone! . . ."

And so on, as in their salad days they had been wont to address one another.

Then they lapsed into French, for the Dane had during his long sojourn abroad forgotten all the German he ever knew, and, as he acknowledged later, had almost forgotten his mother tongue as well.

His friend had become a big bug, not only là-bas, but here in Paris, too, according to the newspapers.

"Happily, I'm not of a jealous disposition, old man. Tout au contraire! I've taken as much care of that picture of yours as if it were one of my own."

"What picture do you mean?"

"Don't you remember the huge canvas which you christened *The Deluge?* There it is, in the old place against the wall, and a fine lot of room it takes up, to be sure. I've been paying floor space for it all these years!"

A torrent of youthful ardour, and loathing for wedded life, swept through Steffen's being.

Yes, he remembered now! He had been suddenly called back to that execrable little town where his insufferably idiotic marriage had cribbed him; he had clenched his fists and answered the summons; he had left his picture behind him, unfinished. When, a decade later, he had visited Paris in Brigitte's company, the thought of the big composition had flashed through his mind. But his wife was no longer the beauty she had once been, and he had not had courage enough to look up old friends lest he should expose himself and her to their ridicule or their pity.

Then the thing had completely lapsed from his memory.

His friend wanted here and now to turn the canvas round to the light, and to rid it of its protective wrappings. But Steffen put a restraining hand on Christensen's arm.

"No. First let me have a look at what you yourself are doing."

He spoke less from a desire to be polite than from a dread of contemplating the shades of a happier day, called up from the tomb. A smile—how familiar it seemed—flitted across his friend's face; it was a smile half bitter, yet full of resignation.

To Steffen it seemed as if he himself had smiled.

He looked at this picture and at that.—Indifferently good, one and the other.—Technique much as it had been twenty years ago, and even then it was

vieux jeu.—Shadows like asphalt, over-emphasised light.—Then a bow to the plein-air vogue; or, again, a hint at the modernest of the modern.

A man who had lost his way, who had lost himself, his ego, and who toiled on, collecting the refuse rejected by his compeers.

He must hide his disappointment somehow; he must utter a word of praise. Mustn't be too exaggerated, that might have a bad effect; just a kindly phrase or two, such as old comrades can exchange without harm.

But Christensen knew; he knew only too well!

"Don't bother to say anything nice. Really not worth while. I sell enough to keep a roof over my head, and therewith it fulfils its object!"

Steffen thought: "I've never sunk into such a pit of despair." Then by a natural transition, a transition so spontaneous as to give him no time for reflection, he asked:

"Are you married?"

His friend wagged his forefinger in the air, as the citizens of Rome are wont to do when implying a negative.

"That cross has been spared me," he cried with the scorn of confirmed bachelordom—a state Steffen had always envied. But at this moment the latter's only idea was:

"So that, too, does not prevent a man running to seed."

A wave of tenderness towards Brigitte swept over him as he mused.

Then they strolled off arm in arm to lunch together—went to a restaurant which they had frequented twenty years before, and where everything was as it had been.

Above all, his friend was as he always had been—the same mannerisms, the same intonation, the same vocabulary, the same jokes, the same boyish gestures. One might have fancied that there had been no passing of the years since the two had met, that time had been asleep.

"His stagnation's of a very different sort from mine," said Steffen in his heart. There was no self-commendation in the thought; but it was very soothing, all the same.

When Christensen asked where he was putting up, Steffen felt ashamed to mention the Ritz, fearful lest his friend should take him for a snob. He therefore lied boldly, giving the name of a much humbler hostelry to which he could move that very evening, so as not to make his poorer friend feel uncomfortable.

"Won't you take coffee up in my digs?" said the Dane. "You remember my little Viennese coffee machine? It's still working!"

As they entered the studio again, he pointed to the giant canvas which, besieged on all sides by innumerable smaller ones, was leaning against the wall.

"First of all let me lend a hand in digging the

fellow out of all this lumber. Then, while I'm busy grinding the coffee, you can feast your eyes on your old friend."

"Old gammon," cried Steffen, trying to hide his curiosity even from himself.

Christensen's eyes opened wide in reproof:

"I wish I had a number of such gammons in my smoking-room," said he, hurling his own pictures to right and to left, and kicking them out of the way.

Then, very cautiously, he turned the monster round, leaning it with its back against the wall, and loosening the clips which held the protective sheeting in place.

"You'll do the actual uncovering yourself," said Christensen, making off to another corner of the studio and setting a match to his spirit lamp.

Steffen hesitated to let the curtain fall. "You'll only suffer another disappointment," he said to himself. Then, annoyed at his own pusillanimity, he wrenched the sheet aside.

So that's the thing, is it? Yes, it was as he had remembered. He might have painted it but yesterday, so well did he recall its every detail, so intensely alive did it appear. And yet—he and it were as the universe apart! It must have fallen down from some other planet. Strokes of the brush such as no earthly man had ever made. Tones and colours never excogitated before . . .

Left, in the foreground, there was a reef of pitch-black rocks, serried in ranks together like organ-pipes,

recalling the Giant's Causeway on Staffa Isle. It gave a vertical strength, unparalleled! Horizontally, massing upward, one upon another, with outstretched, eager hands were bodies—bodies contorted, bodies entangled, woven together in murderous strife. Each countenance expressed a differing dread of death; each grappling hand was another embodiment of the will to live, intensified to the pitch of madness. A vision of surging humanity; the whole of it a seething and labouring background for the climax of drama in the foreground—a mother and child; a mother who had succeeded in climbing on to a ridge of rock, her baby in her arms; a mother whom the back-wash of the breakers was wrenching from her precarious foothold, and sweeping for ever from the nurseling she had rescued.

"Oh, hell!"

'Twas all his lips could utter, before, in a veritable martyrdom of self-reproach, he crumpled up, sitting before the picture chin on hand, brooding disconsolately. Could it have been this very hand which had called these things out of the womb of nothingness?

"And to realise that I was once capable of that!"

He could have kicked himself in his fury.

His friend, a cup of steaming coffee in hand, roused him from his reverie.

"Well, has it been decently looked after, your—gammon?"

Steffen jumped up, smiting himself on his forehead:

"I was once able to do things like that!"

"That wasn't 'being able,' it was youth, old man. I don't want to compare myself with you, but we all of us started off on fine horses when we went forth to conquer the world! Yes, all of us—unless they unseated us and threw us into the mud. I've seen a lot of your stuff since then—at the big international exhibition of 1900, for instance—and I must tell you: You may have become another man, but you have certainly not hidden your talent, for I have never seen anything of yours which showed a falling-off."

Steffen thought: "He's doing me the same kindly service I wanted to perform for him before luncheon." Nevertheless his spirits rose. He scrutinised the picture more carefully, and recognised that there was much he could better now, apart altogether from the unfinished state of the canvas as a whole. Here was something out of drawing, and a clumsy grouping; that piece, there, was a mere daub; the whole thing lacked weight and serious endeavour; its levity was almost criminal.

"You are right," he said at length. "A man changes, he becomes some one totally different."

"If you'd only take that subject up again now, you'd make a fine picture out of it."

"I have no right to creep into cast-off clothes,

even if they don't look so shabby after all. They can't suit me any longer!"

"But you'll take it home with you?"

"After having burdened you with it so long, I can't in decency let it cumber your room any more!"

"It has brought me all kinds of good luck," said his friend genially. "Quite a number of customers have come here on its account. And when, casually, I showed it to . . ."

He stopped short, whistling through his teeth.

"What's up now?"

"Ah, pas grand' chose! I was just thinking of days to come. How long do you expect to stay?"

"That depends on my work."

"It goes without saying that this old place of mine is at your service now, as it always has been."

Steffen thanked him warmly; but he was determined not to abuse his friend's hospitality. He would have felt he was sponging.

"Most of our old cronies have gone under. 'Natural selection,' as the saying is. Others have become so respectable that they never set foot in the street; they . . . Even our beloved Montmartre is no longer the same. Cook & Son have cornered the whole neighbourhood, and we are there merely to form a picturesque background. Still, you'll find a nook here and there where one can take one's ease without those infernal Misses poking their noses around to catch a glimpse of us, the wild men. What about making a tryst for ten this evening?"

Steffen named a certain street lamp near Notre Dame de Lorette's, where they had often met as young men.

With that they parted.

Evening came. The estaminet to which Christensen led his friend was buzzing with life and cheerfulness. Among all the nations of the world, the French are the only people who can make a noise charmingly. To Steffen, the "brouhaha" was like a bath of warm water in which one could splash pleasantly and to heart's content.

But at the table where he sat, silence reigned. The coming of this German, this "celebrity," had thrown a douche of cold water over the other painter folk. Not that they were stand-offish; it was merely that they had none of them found a common platform as yet. He felt it was incumbent on him to break the spell. So—as far as his somewhat rusty French permitted—he sang the praises of the Ville Lumière among whose people he felt so much at home.

Now it appeared that here a one and there a one had been to Berlin, and had been flattered by a most hospitable reception of the pictures they had gone there to exhibit, and also by the personal welcome they had enjoyed.

"Why on earth didn't you look me up? Didn't you know I lived there?"

Such an imputation of ignorance was hastily denied. They had not liked to, and—even if one had ventured—"on est si capot—vous savez."

"Well, mind you don't fail to come next time you are around!"

Smiles answered the courteous invitation, and pledges of acceptance were given—a trifle dubiously, however. The times were out of joint, and a cloud of coming disaster weighed upon their spirits.

At this moment a lady came to take her place at a neighbouring table, where the company had already been hailed by the group round Steffen. She was received with every sign of delight; there was a shifting of chairs, and much shaking of hands, till at last they settled down to a gay exchange of conversation.

Steffen's table companions had relapsed into silence. Some of them had turned their heads to look at the newcomer, and were eagerly waiting for a nod of recognition.

She was a small, delicately made woman, with a face framed in brown, wavy hair. Her expression was a blend of tenderness and severity. The blue eyes, under their finely arched brows, were calm. She was dressed in black. And yet the raiment which clung to those limbs of hers could hardly be called "dress." It seemed to flow around her, a timeless garment, a mixture of chiton and veil. The only thing that was modern about her was a wide-brimmed hat, with a long, sweeping ostrich feather at one side.

Steffen's throat began to ache—for no reason as far as he could see.

He looked questioningly at Christensen, and saw the same expression on his friend's face as in the

studio that afternoon, at the close of their talk about *The Deluge*.

Then the Dane made her a sign, to which she responded with a lift of the arm, as much as to say: "Later. A pleasure to look forward to!"

Steffen could refrain no longer from enquiring about the stranger, who had—he could not disguise the fact from himself—made so profound an impression on him.

"Compatriot of mine," explained Christensen, "and for that reason under my special protection, which serves as a sort of notice board to keep off trespassers. So heavily engaged that no one stands the slightest chance of getting a look in. But he on whom fortune smiles may behold the most exquisite of woman's bodies which for the moment exists on God's earth."

"Model?"

Steffen felt a sudden disappointment invading him.

A chorus of friendly laughter greeted the question.

"Not professionally, at least," said Christensen. "Quite otherwise. She's a colleague, gone through the whole mill, does good work, and will do better. Besides, she's well off and has a generous hand to help those who have spent their last penny. I don't believe there's one of us round this table that she hasn't played the fairy godmother to one time or another—and to *that* fellow, too!"

"Who's the man with . . . ?"

Steffen did not dare pronounce the word again.

"With the model? Well, you see, it's this way: If by any chance a man can't find just what he wants, just the type that fits into his picture, he comes with his trouble to her, tells her all about it, says he is absolutely stuck, and so forth. She has a look at the thing, and then, if she thinks well of it, she'll say, 'Come along to my place to-morrow. Bring your canvas with you. Maybe I can manage something for you.' And a colleague, who takes his art seriously, may even be privileged to go and look on."

The thought of such a possibility made Steffen alternately hot and cold all over.

So the talk went on; but all eyes were cast in her direction, furtive glances, which showed with what impatience they awaited a sign from her.

At last she stood up, reproved those who would have hindered her from going, and approached Steffen's table with a slow, swinging movement of limbs and body.

How strangely blue eyes in a brunette can affect a man! Calm reigned supreme in her, together with a playful, unerring strength.

"A daughter of the north," thought Steffen. A chain of saga-like figures passed before his mental vision, although her small, classically shaped head and olive skin should, rather, have conjured up some youthful goddess of Greek antiquity.

Every one had risen, and eager hands were out-

stretched in welcome. She gave each a responsive clasp, without always looking at the person to whom the hand belonged; Steffen, too, passed almost unnoticed; she hardly seemed to heed his name as Christensen spoke it.

She took a chair next her compatriot, so close to Steffen that he could watch her unobserved.

The talk turned on things he knew nothing about, so that he was given no opportunity to bring himself to her notice. But he could listen to her voice. It was clear and rather high-pitched, and she spoke French with a strong foreign accent.

"I wonder if she has never heard of me," thought Steffen. It must be so, for she vouchsafed him hardly a glance.

His uneasiness lasted nearly a quarter of an hour; then he noticed that Christensen had drawn her out of the general conversation, and was speaking for her private ear alone.

She nodded her head, and listened with lowered lids.

"Ah, si, si! Plus que ça! Une merveille tout simplement!" Christensen was saying.

Whereupon she suddenly became alert, and flashed her blue eyes round the table, exclaiming:

"Qui? Qui? Ah, celui-là!"

The blue fires came to a resting-place on his face.

At the same instant she stood up, reached across the table, and shook him cordially by the hand, saying:

"Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur Tromholt. Je n'ai pas su. J'ai mal compris. Idiote que je suis!"

"We've succeeded in making the connection after all," thought Steffen, relieved.

Now she hardly took her eyes off him for a moment. She talked, answered questions; but always her gaze returned to his face, searching and admiring.

Some one asked what work she had on hand at the moment.

"Nothing of my own. I'm sitting to Busson for his *Wounded Amazon;* but since I have to ride the horse without a saddle, I ache in every limb for hours afterwards."

Now Steffen thought the time had come to make his venturesome request:

"I've been told, Madame," he said, and he was painfully conscious of the tremor in his voice, "that you occasionally permit a witness to be present at your sittings. If you consider me worthy of such an honour, may I put in a plea?"

She looked him squarely in the eyes, and, with the same indifference with which she had acknowledged her friends' boisterous welcome, said:

"The man who painted *The Deluge* may ask what he likes."

The others, holding their breath, listened to the dialogue, and no smile, either envious or ambiguous, lighted up their faces.

She, however, opened her vanity-bag, took out a

visiting card, tore it in half, and gave one of the pieces to Steffen, saying:

"Come to my flat to-morrow morning at eleven. If you hand that piece of pasteboard to my maid, she'll show you to my room."

He never closed his eyes in sleep that night, partly because of his joyful expectation of the morrow's visit, and partly because the modest hotel where he had taken up his quarters had no double doors.

As they walked home together, Steffen learned from Christensen further details about the lady.

Her name was Astrid Helsted; she was an orphan, and had inherited a partnership in a firm of which her two brothers were directors.

She had just come of age, but even before that she had thrown off all family ties and had gone abroad so as to lead a life of her own choice. First of all she had studied in Germany and had diligently passed through all the courses at the Academy of Art. Then she came to Paris, so as to give free rein to her artistic talents. Christensen described how, as a girl, she had lived on comradely terms with her colleagues, how they held her in high esteem, and vied with one another to protect her from harm. Then an Englishman of birth and standing had entered her life. Half dilettante, half genius of great originality, this man went in both for sport and for painting; when not in Paris, he was sailing the seas between Biarritz and Monte Carlo on his yacht.

She fell completely under his spell, and never since had any man made the slightest impression on her.

Then Steffen, too, had no prospect of winning her! Still, he was determined to experience the delight that had been promised for the morrow.

Tired and sleepy, his heart beating inordinately, he made his way to the house where she lived.

"Au quatrième, au-dessus de l'entresol," he was informed by the concierge.

He climbed the stairs. The maid answered the door. Her rather forbidding expression changed to one of matter-of-fact welcome as soon as he presented his half of the card. She laid it against the piece she picked up from the hall-table to see if it fitted.

"Monsieur peut entrer," she said.

As she opened the door into the sitting-room, a flood of white light penetrated the ruddy dusk of the entrance hall.

The woman whose acquaintance he had made overnight was on the back of a wooden horse, naked, save for a golden helmet on her head. The horse was one of those always to be found in the better-class studios of sculptors, one whose limbs were jointed so that they could be taken off to facilitate their transport up the stairs.

Her face was turned towards the window, and, since the door opened noiselessly, she had not heard him come in. While the man who had been granted the boon of a sitting was making every use he could

of his privilege, Steffen had leisure to contemplate her peacefully.

Peacefully? Nothing of the sort! His heart beat so furiously that he could scarcely breathe.

Wounded and almost swooning—such was her pose. One leg had slipped down, while the other still clung desperately to the animal's flank, the toes cramped inwards to give the foot a grip; and, while the left hand was nearly hidden behind her body and was clasping her breast, the right was grappling with the tousled mane, and endeavouring to secure a hold.

Tromholt was so shaken by the tragical aspect of the whole movement, that he quite forgot to look at the woman's body which was turned fully towards him. Then, suddenly, his eyes seemed to open, and he was amazed at the beauties of line and contour which were revealed to him in the chiaroscuro of the room.

To look, and to pray: there was nothing else he could do before so much loveliness.

At a sign from the painter, she turned her head slightly, and now he could see her face, which had hitherto been hidden by the thick waves of her hair. The long, curving eyelashes veiled her downcast eyes, but from under the lids he caught a gleam of desperate resolution, so appealing in its force that a man could have but one thought on witnessing it: to leap to her side and offer his own body as a shield to protect this splendid woman so long as danger threatened.

What a strain upon her imagination! How gloriously she yielded herself up to the rôle! What a privilege for any painter to be given the opportunity of fixing her pose and expression on canvas!

"She can't hold on much longer," thought Steffen, not venturing to stir a finger.

And in very truth, a moment later, she took a deep breath, shifted her position to a more comfortable one on the horse's back, seized a shawl, threw it round her, and said:

"Donne-moi quelque chose de fumable. Je n'en peux plus."

Steffen considered that now he might give a sign of life.

She slowly turned about, and looking towards the door near which he still stood, stretched forth her free hand, exclaiming:

"Tiens, tiens! L'illustre maître!"

He was careful to conceal his excitement, and muttered a few words of thanks, which she acknowledged laconically. She then introduced the two men to one another, with an unction which, in spite of her nakedness, could not but remind one of a mistress of ceremonies. Now followed a scrutiny of the work in hand, and Steffen's laudatory comments on the half-finished picture.

In truth he saw little of it, and still less of the painter, for his attention was concentrated on the Amazon herself, who, now sitting comfortably askew, had cocked up her right leg on to her mount's back,

and, while emitting clouds of tobacco smoke, was supporting the hand which held her cigarette by propping the elbow on her bent knee.

She had pushed the golden helmet back from her forehead. Was it a reflection from this casque, or did her skin shine by its own light? Certainly the whole lissom body had a metallic, golden-yellow sheen, the body which at one moment seemed almost childlike in its delicate outline, and at another to show a richness of form which invited a caress.

"You are studying my nudity, Master," she said, with a smile that remained free from embarrassment, "as if I were the first model you had ever seen."

"Please let me keep to myself what I think of your bodily charms. I had rather you would allow me to talk of the spirituality of your pose when I came in. That, indeed, was a miracle. You achieved so vivid a representation, not only of the event you were impersonating, but of the very soul of the classical myth, that I forgot you and myself, and forgot our own time, to live once more in ancient Greece."

She sighed profoundly; and then, suddenly dropping into German, she rejoined:

"What does your great poet say? 'Seeking the land of Hellas with our souls!' I do this with so intense a yearning that my youth, my sense of shame, and my womanliness, seem to me nothing more than sacrifices which it is meet that I should make to the gods."

As she finished speaking, she threw the end of her cigarette into a copper dish which stood on the floor near by, and from which there now rose a little spiral of smoke like that from a burnt offering.

The painter, who had been busy with his brush all through the pause, now glanced at her imploringly, whereupon, with a stifled groan, she resumed her pose.

But only for a few moments. Then, with the easy movement of an accomplished gymnast, she swung her right leg over the back of the horse, jumped lightly down, and slipped into a kimono, saying:

"That's enough for to-day. We'll have lunch in ten minutes."

Therewith she vanished.

Now there began for Steffen an animated and highly strung life, centring round the young woman who had so generously admitted him to the intimacies of her existence.

Most days, and most of the day, they were together; and, as they sat over their meal in one restaurant or another, she would tell him how she was consumed with ambition, and towards what goals she was striving. She showed him her work, too, rejoicing in his praise like a child, and accepting his criticism with the gratitude of a disciple who has just discovered a teacher.

Everything she said was agreeably tinged with the boundless admiration she felt for him, an admiration

which had been nourished upon several years' study of his paintings.

In Germany, there was no one who cherished such a faith in him, and he had to go abroad if he wished to encounter it.

Ah, that was unjust. He had one faithful admirer in Germany—but she was the fetter on his life.

Hardly had he broken away from her for a time, hardly had he freed himself from the paralysing influences of the commonplace, hardly had he come to Paris, when the great world, with a cry of jubilation, stretched out arms to embrace him, carried him up to the altitudes where he would fain live for ever, and showed him, at his feet, the expanse of wonders that had in truth always been lying there ready for his taking.

Many a man of outstanding ability, many a woman apt for love, crossed his path these days; and wherever he went he was hailed with respect and often with enticement; but the crown of his delights was association with the woman who, in the splendour of her unveiled body, had revealed herself as a goddess.

He had not expressed a wish for a repetition of that experience. He knew that his virility could not endure the strain, for he burned to possess her, while what Christensen had told him about her warned him against any attempt to make love.

She spoke to him of many things, of her home, of her girlhood, her family (of this last, with little

esteem). She was frank enough about the awakening of her erotic sensibilities. But when he said anything which implied a desire to probe into the history of her great love-experience, she showed an impenetrable reserve. Once, when he ventured to press such enquiries, she clasped his hand, saying:

"Let us leave that alone, dear Master! These things have cut too deep for me to talk of them."

Thus matters went on for three weeks. Then, one afternoon, when he came, as he had often come before, to have tea with her, he was denied admittance.

"Madame est sortie."

He tried a second day, and again a third, with the same result.

"Madame est sortie."

There was no getting beyond that.

He wrote to her, but received no answer.

He tortured himself with reproaches. Had he gone to work incautiously? Had he behaved in a way which had led her to think him a man in search of a love adventure?

At length he poured out his troubles to Christensen, who smiled indulgently.

"Very simple! Sir Roland Hunt is back in Paris."

Therewith, this experience, too, seemed to have departed into the land of shades.

CHAPTER XXVII

WAR!

It had come at last. Where had not the terrors of the inexorably approaching crash of the modern world been discussed and anticipated? Its coming had been a familiar topic for years in every house, at every dinner table, and wherever two persons were gathered together in animated converse. The menace of it weighed on every one, like a nightmare which the mind cannot shake off.

The only problem was: are we going to have it in our time; or is the doom to await our children?

Fate had answered.

The red sunlight invaded field and thicket. Purple-tinted mists eddied and swayed around the tree-tops, prematurely fading to gold. The late summer encompassed Neuheide with its blessing and its plenty, more lavish than it had been for many a year. The rye crop, down to the last stook, had been safely garnered; so, too, the wheat. No need to feel anxious about the oats, they were coming along finely; while as for the potato harvest, it promised abundantly.

Into the midst of this serenity fell a telegram: "Come home now. Later may be impossible."

Newspapers followed: Declaration of war, a question of hours.

Quick! A couple of trunks, hastily packed; shaking of horny, loving hands; gazing into tear-brimming eyes, how many of them, alas, how many, for the last time!

Off to the station.

Steffen, Brigitte, Atta, and the two maidservants who were to carry on the Berlin household.

Empty trains rushing by. Why? Whence? Whither? No one knew. At last came one into which they were allowed to clamber.

A day, a night—and what a night!—then they arrived at their destination.

The streets were thronged, even at this early hour. Reservists with bandboxes, and wearing some kind of a cockade, long rows of them, ready for any encounter, not needing to be led; workmen, to-day waiting for the whistle to summon them into the factory, to-morrow, maybe, on their way to some battle-front; women, refugees from the eastern provinces, laden with buckets, or boxes, or bags, into which they had stuffed what they could put their hands on in the flurry of departure; wan and heavy-eyed from sleeplessness—and yet, every eye alight with the flame of self-sacrifice, a flame which heaven sends down from time to time to the children of this earth.

Not a porter anywhere to be seen. The Tromholts must drag their baggage along themselves as best they might; and Brigitte, though nearly crushed under the burden she carried, still had energy enough

to draw Steffen's attention to this man or the other, striding forward, filled with the sacred fire.

How damp and dark the house seemed! Quick, throw back the shutters, open the windows! Let light and air flood in. Happy those who could still enjoy them! And doubly happy those who should have to forego both, together with life itself, at the call of the fatherland!

"Daddy darling, may I become a nurse?"

Atta stood before him, her eyes turned beseechingly on his, her hands clasped; and Brigitte, her arm round the girl's waist, added her plea to Atta's.

"You are too little versed in the ways of the world, child, and too unpractical. How could you ever succeed in so arduous a task?"

And yet, in his secret heart, he had already granted her request. There was no other sacrifice he could make upon his country's altar in her time of need.

No other sacrifice? Aye, there was one. The greatest known to man. His son, his only son! Even though, hitherto, he had not looked upon this son as his own, now he would do so, would make the lad as much his own flesh and blood as Kurt was flesh and blood of the woman who was fretting her heart out as to the boy's whereabouts.

He had gone to Norway, his usual resort in the summer holidays, for it had been his custom to spend only the Christmas season at home, staying till the

New Year, and then betaking himself to his studies once more.

"Where can he be?"

Two days later, Kurt was with them, had managed to smuggle himself home via Denmark. He wanted to go straight on to Munich and join up, for he had done his military service there, and belonged to the Bavarian army.

"Stay one night at home, my lad; only one night."

When a mother begs like that, one can't say no—especially when her eyes glisten with the pride of sacrifice.

That evening they sat round the table, in the glow of the stove. A rose-tree in a pot blushed ruddy under the lamp; a bottle of champagne wasted its fragrance on unappreciative revellers, for none of them had the heart to drink.

Brigitte sat next her boy, holding his hand, and stroking his hair from time to time, pushing back from his forehead the locks which were thinning before their time (for he was going bald prematurely, poor lad); while Atta, radiant and languishing with love, fussed about the brother who was for her, today, the most splendid of them all.

Steffen had pulled a chair up to the stove. There was only a little wood-fire burning, for the evening was far from cold. But the boy loved a fire; it always reminded him of the pleasant Christmastides he had spent at home.

From his vantage point, Steffen contemplated the

young man, stocky of figure, with a high forehead, and soft eyes, rather sad and weary in expression. This was his son. This youth had at one time ridden on his knee, sat on his lap, played with his beard; Steffen had done him a grievous wrong, had banished him, had deprived his childhood and adolescence of hearth and home. How ample an inheritance of goodness must Kurt have received from his mother, since he harboured no grudge against such a father!

A wave of tenderness, such as he had never experienced in his life before, flooded Steffen's whole being.

"What a fool you've been," he told himself. "You might have had a son, you have actually had a son all these years, and instead of trying to win his affections, you have thrust him away among strangers, and, as a stranger, have kept him far from your side, making him fend as best he could for himself."

Not much was said. The hour was too solemn for conventional chatter; and it was still more important not to let one's feelings run away with one.

Steffen's eyes travelled from the face of the son to that of the mother.

Her habitual, unpretentious modesty did not forsake her even in this sublime moment, and in relation to her own child, now grown to manhood. When she raised her hand to stroke his brow or his cheek, she faltered as if she were afraid of being a nuisance. But there was no gainsaying the abundance of unreasoning love she was bestowing on her child

now, as if she were trying to make up in this one evening hour for having, in her devotion to another, failed hitherto to shower on him all the wealth of her affection. Even though to-morrow they must part, to-night she had her boy beside her, and her happiness was so fraught with pain, that there remained hardly anything of the earth in her ecstasy.

"She may have become matronly," thought Steffen, "but there is none so sweet as she to be found anywhere in the whole world."

At length the poignancy of her emotion became too great for her to bear. Her heart resented the strain; and, in spite of her protests, Steffen insisted that she should go to bed.

To-morrow, at peep of day, Kurt would have to be off; but he showed no desire to follow his mother's example.

"Come along to the studio," said Steffen. "We can talk there as much as we like, without fear of disturbing her."

They sat in the corner which was curtained off with green hangings—father and son. They drank a couple of liqueur brandies to refresh themselves, and lighted their pipes.

They had never sat thus together in their lives before. Indeed, Steffen had never been as near to anybody as he was now to the youth who had made so sudden an irruption into his intimacy.

At first the talk turned upon their work, as was natural between two artists.

"Why have you always been so careful to hide your stuff from me? I've not seen a single thing you have done these three years past. You've not even let me have a look into the portfolios you brought here to-day."

"It's hard to speak of such things, Dad. You have the first claim to hearing why, and yet it is more difficult to explain matters to you than to any one else on earth."

"How's that, my lad?"

"It was a pity you let me out of your hands, Dad. If I had had you to teach me, I should not have come under the influences which have so mastered me that I've got to follow whither they lead, willy-nilly. Besides, if you could have kept me by you, there would not be such fundamental differences of outlook between us as there are now."

Ah, it was the old, old song; the song of revolt, which the sons intone against the leadership of the fathers!

But to-night such considerations were out of place. To-night there was nothing but love, linking them each to the other, no matter if at other times they might have had nothing in common.

"Talk as freely as you like, my lad, it will ease your mind before you go forth to other battles than those you and I have to fight out together."

"Well, Father, it's like this. One can't escape one's destiny. Generation confronts generation. What we at one time worshipped is now a thing

accurst. It's fate, and there's no use trying to protect oneself against it. Forms and colours that not so very long ago seemed nothing but idiocy, suddenly become all that is most sacred. Why have I not shown you my work? Because I feared you might chuck the stuff in my face. Not that I think you would actually have done so; but you would have done it metaphorically, and that would have been even worse. And when I look at yours," he glanced round the dimly lighted room. "Forgive me, Father, for never having asked you to show me your work! But whenever I look at it, my heart aches—for you know how fond I am of you . . ."

There was a stinging in Steffen's heart; a racking pain.

The spectre had come forth, shadowy, its breath heavy with the stench of death. A delight to join battle, if the monster had only allowed one to come to grips with it! That spectre! The spectre of growing old! There it stood. His own son had summoned it from the shades, the lad who, on a day to come, would himself have to wrestle with the same foe, and would likewise be worsted in the combat.

But to-night another power was present, a power which raised him high above personal considerations, a power which subdued even this mighty spectre, just as it is capable of mastering all strife, and trouble, and confusion.

"You have not finished yet, my son," said Steffen,

with a smile that was more tender than the circumstances called for. "Go on. I am listening."

"Yes, Father, you are right. I have not finished yet. I've often said to myself: 'You can't stand this conflict for ever. You'll go to the dogs if you try. On the one hand you have an article of faith which must be your guiding principle throughout life; on the other, there is a man, who was at one time God Almighty so far as you were concerned, and from whom now you would prefer never to accept the tiniest morsel of bread.' Who could stand such a contradiction for long, Father? So I mean, if I ever come out of the war alive, and you offer me an allowance, to turn your kindness down. I'd rather break stones by the roadside than have to carry such a burden."

Steffen put his hand on his step-son's arm.

"You don't need to bother about me, my lad. My circle of working possibilities is pretty well closed. There has been much in my life that I would have ordered otherwise . . . But this is neither the time nor the place to explain the reasons which have made me act as I have done. Nearly every one is forced by life to stray from his chosen path—but there are other ways leading to Rome! And to the Rome of death, we must all go. Let's leave personal affairs, and talk more of generalities. You say: 'Generation confronts generation.' No, you young rascal, things are not as simple as that! What is it makes one master tolerated and even fêted by the younger

generation, and another rejected, although the latter knows quite as much as the former, and may even practise the same kind of style? Here are influences at work which are far too paradoxical and far too enigmatical for us to ascribe them to anything so simple as one generation in conflict with another. Besides, we so often confuse getting old with getting bad! When I was your age I despised Knaus and Defregger and men of their sort, quite as much as you now despise me."

"Dad!" The cry came full of agonised protest from Kurt's lips.

"There, there, Sonny, I did not mean it unkindly. And as for Piloty, he made me feel sick, not to mention old Kaulbach, and Spitzweg whom I nicknamed "Sugarplums," and so forth and so on. It seems to me that contempt is in a way a moral obligation, a signpost, as it were, without which youth can make no progress. So it's quite all right that you youngsters should foster scorn; but when the old ones start being contemptuous, there's nothing for it but to lay them out with a pitchfork. No progress is made with mere vituperation. Art can only flourish in the soil of efficient craftsmanship, and yet the ablest technician is often the worst of routinists. Rubens alone is sufficient illustration of what I mean. No, my lad, there's no criterion in matters of art: none of talent; none of technique; least of all, one of moral purpose. Caprice counts as everything, and everything is suggestion. Where suggestion takes

its rise is not always easy to say. Sometimes you can track it down to a dealer's shop, whose master has taken a nimble-witted journalist secretly into his service; at other times you may trace it to the chair of some learned professor who is manufacturing corroboration in support of his pet theory; and there are the cronies who foregather in their favourite eating house, not to mention the hundred and one 'petites chapelles,' every one of 'em busy making or marring reputations. You've been a victim of suggestion, just as I have from time to time. Not even self-esteem is immunised, for suggestion can actually annihilate one's pleasure in one's own work."

"Yours is a very sad sort of wisdom, Father; and the experiences which have brought you that wisdom must have been sadder still. I want to know how best I may profit by it."

"You can't profit by it, Kurt, my son. All you can do is to try, when you are facing the enemy, not to allow your mind to be burdened with thoughts about what may or may not happen in the future. Your old Dad won't worry, even if you do, according to his ideas, botch your work and fling on the most incongruous colours. You'll find your feet all right, I've no fear about that. The maddest of pictures has a tendency to become rational as time goes on, even if the element of rationality is no more than a nail upon which you can hang the masterpiece against the wall. So be of good cheer; and as soon as you get back, we'll see what further can be done."

Thus the most important question seemed to be solved. But Kurt stared before him, and appeared to hesitate.

"Come, out with it, you young ruffian; you've got something else on your chest!"

"Yes, Dad, and it's awfully difficult to talk about. The truth of the matter is—that—well, there'll have to be a war marriage in our family."

Steffen sprang to his feet.

"Lord God Almighty! What's this you say?"

He seized his step-son by the shoulders, while Kurt bit his lips and looked rather sheepish.

"Come, don't be afraid, tell me all about it."

Hesitatingly, the story came out: the daughter of an innkeeper; not quite seventeen; an angel in human form; pious parents; very religious people; everything as usual—you know!

"How long's it been going on? Any expectations?"

The silence which followed was sufficient answer.

Steffen flung his china pipe against the wall, so that the bowl was shattered, and a cascade of white particles scattered in all directions.

"Pretty kind of parting gift," he cried, stumping round the murky room, knocking over easels, sending brushes and paints to the right-about, never noticing the disorder he was causing.

At last he put a brake upon his emotion, tried to recover his calm, sat down, and asked:

"Has she any kind of education?"

"How could she have?"

A child of the people. Destined to go out to service. Now this mishap cranking in.

"Suppose the war had not come, what would you have done?"

"I'd have had to contribute to her support. But now—Father! Her parents are sure to send the poor girl packing. I simply can't let her go to the dogs. I should not be worthy of the bullet which is destined for me."

"Don't talk such rot about bullets being destined for you! Of course I can't listen to all this nonsense about a war wedding."

"But I must, Father. I've a sense of decency. Besides, I'm in honour bound . . ."

He could get no further, and Steffen saw that other tactics would have to be employed to win Kurt's confidence. The moment had come to delve deeper into the young man's heart. Here, in the person of this lad, Steffen beheld the symbol of his own troubled and enslaved existence; he saw this youth, too, heading for a disastrous marriage which would, in its turn, bring humiliation and torture. Here was, indeed, a soul to be saved from a mistake which would prove a thousandfold worse than his own. He must attempt the impossible to rescue this step-son of his . . . He asked:

"Is your art of any value to you?"

"Nothing in the world is . . ."

"All the more incumbent on me to save it for

you! If, then, I now say to you, 'Should you enter into such a union as you propose, it would be better for you never to return from the front,' you will be ready to believe me when I add that it makes my heart bleed to say such a thing!"

"But, Father, that is such a dreadful thing to say . . ."

"You'll have to put up with worse than that before I've done. If you were proposing to take up the career of a civil servant or a merchant or some such respectable, bourgeois profession, I should say, 'By all means! This girl or another—it makes very little difference. You've got to knuckle under sooner or later; and so long as she's healthy and a decent sort, and has a smattering of education . . .' But since you look forward to being an artist, that is to say one of the élite, a self-made aristocrat, whose patents of nobility have been written with your own hand and whose coat of arms will be looked at by coming generations down the centuries, then I say to you, 'To take a wife is equivalent to cutting off your right hand. You'll ruin yourself as an artist in any case, and what remains is only fit for the dogs.'"

Kurt's eyes stared in wonder and bewilderment.

But Steffen heeded him not. He continued:

"I've had a lifetime for looking round me and witnessing the downfall of all those who, having lofty aspirations, saw them collapse as soon as they took wives unto themselves. They were not such

bad artists, many of them reached a fairly high level; but they never rose higher once they were married, they just remained as they had been. Nothing more was heard of them, unless it might be a domestic scandal, public or private, as the case might be; there may have been secret love-affairs, and all the loose living commonly associated with what is called genius. But if you ask whether they were happy—what *is* happiness? Happiness is an amusement for those who live on the lower levels. Up above, where people are concerned with very different questions, they shrug their shoulders at it. A man of finer metal has no time for weddings, no time to rock cradles, or to wipe youngsters' noses."

Kurt no longer ventured to contradict, but sat open mouthed in his horror, looking like a man who expects a death sentence. Yet that is hardly a fair image, for he was not concerned about his own fate. When, at length, he managed to pull himself together, and enter a protest, it related to his mother.

"*You* say that, Father? You, who have lived with Mummy all these years . . ."

Steffen cut him short. The destructive impulse to tear down the last veils was almost too much for him.

"Yes, my dear boy, if *I* say that to you, I who . . . I who . . ."

He paused, for at length he began to read in Kurt's face the harm he had already done, and what greater havoc he was about to work.

To destroy a holy of holies, to defile a mother's

image, to reduce her value to the nullity of those whose existence is useless and burdensome—that was what he had been going to do, that was the crime to which the madness of the hour was urging him. Once only in his life, to the friend of his youth, had Steffen opened his heart on this matter; and what a flood of disaster had overwhelmed him and Brigitte in consequence! That mistake must not be repeated.

These considerations flashed through his mind like lightning; and, tacking on the instant, he went on:

"Yes, if I say that to you (I to whom nothing of the sort applies, because in your mother I have a treasure such as few on earth possess), you will surely credit me, since the exception proves the rule."

Kurt drew an audible breath of relief. His greatest fear had been allayed. Steffen resumed:

"When I started to found a family (I say nothing of the difficulties that ensued, by which you more than any one else were gravely affected), when I took this step, I had already made my way in the world, so there was no reason why I should not venture it. Whereas you—need I expatiate on the difference? I will say my last word on the matter. Tell this girl of yours that she shall never be forsaken. Mummy and I will take care of her, whether you come back from the war or not. Her child shall be ours. You know Mummy's maternal instinct. You know she would always pick up and care for any fledgling that had fallen from the nest. Don't you think you can trust her in this matter?"

The young man buried his face in his arms, and wept.

Steffen knew that the battle was won, and said to himself:

"Thanks be, that I held my tongue!"

They shook hands, and went to bed.

Next morning, Kurt left for Munich, laden with sandwiches and cigarettes and chocolate and medicaments of various kinds, ranging from specifics against over-fatigue to safeguards against wound-infection, and with all the truck which maternal love and maternal anxiety could induce him to cart along.

Four weeks later came the news that he had been killed on the Somme.

CHAPTER XXVIII

At first Brigitte refused to wear mourning.

She seemed almost an ecstatic, with her hands folded on her breast, her eyes cast heavenward, a half-demented smile curling her lips. From room to room she went about her tasks, and she was even heard to sing as she went.

For several days matters were like this with her, and the nights were no otherwise.

Steffen called in the family doctor; but at first she would have none of him.

"What does he want with me? I have never been in better health, nor so happy."

Finally, however, she had to consent to have her heart examined, and a tracing taken of her pulse.

Suddenly, in the midst of the examination, she broke into convulsive weeping. The doctor gave her a couple of morphine injections, which calmed her and put her to sleep. By the time she awoke, the worst was over.

Sorrowful weeks followed. She tortured herself with reproaches, and for hours on end she could be heard muttering, that she should have done this, that, or the other for the boy.

His lonely and wilful life weighed like a heavy sin upon her conscience.

She never dreamed of blaming Steffen. The fault was hers alone. All that had been lacking to Kurt's life must be laid to her charge.

No one but Steffen was permitted to come near her at this time.

She might have been pleased to see Atta at her side; but Atta, the way for whose acceptance as a nurse, in spite of her extreme youth, had been smoothed by special recommendations, was long since immersed in her new duties and could not get away. One afternoon a week was all she could spend at home. She looked a picture in her nurse's uniform, with its compact white headgear and its floating veil. But no one took any pleasure in her appearance, except that Steffen did a sketch of her.

Besides, she was so weary that, after half an hour's talk, she would fling herself on the first handy sofa, and nothing could wake her. They let her sleep herself out, but in the morning, at half-past five, she must be roused and sent about her business, for the journey to the hospital took the better part of an hour, and she had to be on duty at seven.

Brigitte, even though she herself might have had no rest in the night, would be there to make the girl a cup of tea and see her into a cab.

She had another daughter now—besides Susi, about whom one did not need to worry any more, it would appear—a girl, who was living forlorn in Munich yonder.

Nothing was known of her, not even her name;

but one could probably find out about her from the people with whom Kurt had been lodging.

Brigitte's thoughts circled round and round this girl. At length she declared something must be done; and, since Steffen would not allow her to go alone on such a voyage of discovery, he went too.

What they found confirmed their worst fears. Kurt's surmise had been only too correct.

The poor girl's despair on her return home after reading her lover's name in the casualty list had betrayed her. The whole story had come out.

Her parents had shown her the door. Brigitte's supplications, even, were incompetent to soften their hearts. They did not know so much as their daughter's whereabouts, nor did they wish to. The aid of the police had to be called in.

Loni was her name. She was a sweet, pale, mournful child; the heavy labour at munition work had well-nigh crushed her, and yet she had to do something to support herself and the coming child.

Kurt's description of her had not been merely a lover's hyperbole. The girl was an angel; yes, indeed, a real little angel. She had a face like a Botticelli, framed in golden love-locks; trusting eyes, as blue as the sky itself; and she was wrapped in an innocence which fully explained his longing to atone. The lass was so shy that it needed all their powers of persuasion to lure her from the garret into which she had locked herself at the strangers' approach.

Very gradually, however, she plucked up courage, and confided her troubles to them.

The people who had given her house room had been kind to her. She could stay with them for the time being, said these helpers fallen from the sky, but she must no longer do the work that was wearing her out; she could learn dressmaking or millinery, and later on would be able to earn her own living. In any case she could rely on aid for herself and the expected baby.

She could hardly believe in her good fortune at first, and stared vacantly from one to the other. Then she fell to weeping; and Brigitte had to put her arms round the girl and kiss her and comfort her and stroke her into a realisation of the new and better life that lay ahead.

When they were seated in the train for the return journey, Brigitte said to Steffen:

"You see, dear, I was right; that's why I could get no peace." She thanked him earnestly for having left his work to accompany her on this errand of mercy: "Alone I could never have succeeded . . ."

Winter came, and the tale of fresh victories, with which for years we Germans were regaled day after day, danced on its way in undiminished splendour, comforting many a poor soul who found in it consolation for personal miseries. True, the display of flags was not quite so orgiastic, and many voices were now raised to warn the people that the war would

not be over so quickly as was at first supposed. But no one suspected as yet that the game was already lost.

That period of the war rolled by like a cinema film; and its recollection weighs heavily to-day upon the spirits of those who, passing from enthusiasm to anxiety and from anxiety back to enthusiasm, lived through it in a whirl of spurious activities.

Spurious activities? Yes, they were spurious! For all who were buoyed up by the hope of helping on a German victory busied themselves in occupations that exceeded their powers and destroyed their health, and they never suspected that what they were doing was nothing but vanity and vexation of spirit, and merely enhanced the world's misery a thousandfold.

Steffen, too, was occupied in creating important war societies, which ceaselessly gave birth to fresh offspring in the shape of daughter organisations; he went about with a feeling of consequence that increased his self-esteem, occupying half a dozen of the highest official posts, which under ordinary circumstances would never have been entrusted to a layman; and as he busied himself with this and with that, he marvelled that he had hitherto remained content to be no more than a painter.

His art was completely neglected. At the best he was only reminded of it when some tin god, to whom he had gained admittance on business of the utmost urgency, observed benevolently:

"Ah, then you are the celebrated . . ."

There was no object in using the brush. Who had leisure to bother about pictures in such an emergency?

Herr Naschke announced:

"I'm going to turn my shop into a soup-kitchen. Then from time to time the soup will slop over on to the walls, and people who look at the splashes may even lift their eyes to the pictures hanging above them."

Those who had not put by any savings—could e'en go a-begging. Steffen was one of them. He had always lived up to his income, and could not fall back on a comfortable bank account.

Of course there was Neuheide. But Neuheide was giving trouble. The harvests were fetching good prices; but ever since the old steward had been retired on account of advancing years, and a young man had assumed the reins of government over land and people, no blessings had been showered on the place. Mishap here, wrong choice of crops there; failure to sell now, unwise sales at another time; 'twas nothing but worry in every nook and corner. Nor could Steffen resort to dismissal, seeing that he had with great difficulty succeeded in getting the man leave to stay away from the front. Besides, where was a substitute to be found? To crown all, hands were lacking for labour in the fields, for more than half the men had been called up.

"Steffen," he said to himself, "you must find some

way out of your difficulty. Yes, but how, when your head is abuzz from poor feeding and lack of money? How, indeed, when the 'gold mine,' for which all the world envies you, only earns its name by the fact that it swallows up all your substance, which has long since become nothing but paper?"

Meanwhile, prices were soaring; they had doubled; they had trebled. More and more urgent claims were made upon Steffen's purse, and he was less and less able to meet them.

His heart failed him at the thought of the dangers which threatened; and always the same thought returned, again and again. It broke in upon his sleep at night, it accompanied him wherever he went and whatever he did, and from each blank wall there glared at him the admonition: "Sell out! Sell out!"

He hesitated long before confiding this thought to Brigitte. Some years ago he had had a magnificent offer. But when he mentioned it at table, Brigitte, Susi, and Atta, as if by concerted action, burst into tears, begging and beseeching him not to do such a horrible thing.

Now he feared an even more heart-rending scene, for since her son's death Brigitte had been very easily upset. She quaffed large quantities of convallaria and strophanthus and digitalis; her nervous crises were of more frequent occurrence.

Finally, however, he could do no otherwise than discuss his plans with her. The consequences were far milder than he had led himself to expect.

With calm, though mournful eyes, she said:

"We've sacrificed much already; a little more will not make so great a difference."

Henceforward he took the matter of a sale seriously to heart, and soon strange-looking individuals were to be seen visiting him in his studio: old roués, would-be aristocrats, with white spats; or working men, down at heel, wearing mangy fur coats.

It was impossible to find out who the purchasers might be for whom these creatures acted—for a consideration, of course!

From time to time a letter would fly in on Steffen, smelling of the newest perfume which had found its way into Germany over Switzerland. The style and spelling gave the writer's station away. Herein the wife of one of the prospective purchasers would express her impatience to get the matter of the sale settled quickly so that she might assume her new rôle of lady of the manor as soon as possible before the eyes of an astonished world. There were even hints that in the event of the sale being satisfactorily concluded, the lady would like to have her portrait painted, paying, of course, a munificent fee. If she were young and pretty, she would probably enclose a photograph, which suggested even more fascinating possibilities.

The whole business was loathsome in the extreme. But the millions beckoned like victorious flags, behind which one could march gayly forward into the jaws of death.

What did a couple of peaceful months in the country every summer matter so long as one could be quit of these pressing troubles, and have plenty of money to play about with, though others might have to tighten their belts? As soon as the war was over, instead of going to Neuheide, one would travel off to St. Moritz or to Ostend, and one would find fresh subjects for one's brush, and experience marvel upon marvel.

The deed of sale was signed. A leather merchant was the new owner, a certain Herr Piefke—what his real name was mattered little. A few years back he would take down with his own hands of a morning the shutters of his little saddler's shop in the Landsberger Allee. Now he spread the whole of the purchase money on the table, just as he had been used to being paid in cash over the counter.

When Steffen and Brigitte got home from the lawyer's, they fell into one another's arms, and sobbed like two homeless waifs.

Well, the thing was done now and could not be undone.

The most doleful of the three was Atta. At first she refused to believe the horrible tidings; and when, on her next visit home, she learned that the sale was an accomplished fact, she turned on her heel and fled from the house. For three weeks thereafter she did not come to see her parents, and when Brigitte reproached the girl for her neglect, all Atta replied was:

"Do leave me alone. I'll do nothing but cry if I come, so what's the good?"

The day was approaching when the new owners were to enter into possession. Autumn was not far advanced, and the sun was red, as it only knew how to be in Neuheide, where everything was a thousand times more beautiful than anywhere else in the world.

Atta had been given a day's leave of absence, and all three took the train out for the last time. Each wanted to save the thing that lay nearest to the heart, otherwise all that had been experienced here might be irretrievably lost, for the furnishings and fixtures, which were not suited to the Berlin establishment, had been included in the sale. Herr Piefke had insisted that the mansion should be handed over with its contents, for the decorators he had summoned to advise him had agreed that they could in no way improve the appointments of the place, since these were, indeed, perfect.

Ah, those were sad hours.

Atta retired to the room that had been hers since childhood. She wanted to pack up the toys and school-books which were worth preserving. Susi's things, too, she overhauled, in case this beloved sister of hers should ever come back to Germany.

Brigitte passed from room to room like a sleep-walker, stroking the furniture she had once dusted so lovingly. She stood before her writing-desk which was stuffed with old letters and stories half

told; but she lacked the heart to tidy them and sort out those she wished to keep. Steffen it was who gathered them all together into a box.

She had one more request to make.

"Come with me to the gamekeeper's lodge, dear. I should so love to see once more the place where Atta was born, and where Wulle-Wulle and Susi and Kurt used to romp. I have lost all three of them—for the gods alone know whether I shall ever see Susi again."

Steffen slipped his arm through hers, and, in silence, they wandered down the avenue of pines they loved so well, and along by the whitewashed wall of the farm.

The magpies chattered as of old among the branches, and squirrels chased one another up and down the trunks, as tame as if they were the same russet-coated little fellows who had played those antics so many years ago.

How peaceful was this little universe.

While out there the shells were bursting and machine guns were rattling, and each day claimed its harvest of the dead!

What mattered, in this welter of destruction, the fate of one individual?

Set the teeth, bid the place "farewell"! For tomorrow the Piefkes are to make their triumphal entry!

CHAPTER XXIX

The war was at a deadlock. The best one could say of it was that it crept along. Month after month, apart from the daily successes in which people had ceased to believe, the situation underwent no change.

Since the failure of the murderous assault on Verdun, since Hindenburg's vast plan of encirclement on the eastern front had collapsed like a reed, Germany's frenzied belief in victory was over and done with.

Nothing but a miracle could save the situation.

And the miracle was wrought! Russia made peace overtures.

Much the same thing had happened in the Seven Years' War when Elizabeth died and her successor laid his homage at the feet of the little Prussian king.

The hungry masses, whose faith in good luck had almost been broken, heaved a deep sigh of relief.

For the people was hungry, even as of old, those confined in a beleaguered city were hungry.

Germany by now had become nothing other than a beleaguered city. The world was diminished, while the wrath filling this same world had grown to such proportions that everything German was gripped in a vice and seemed ripe for destruction.

The nation accepted hunger with a good grace. Bread was rationed down to such tiny quantities as

to be scarcely worth the trouble of chewing; the paltry dabs of butter hardly worth the trouble of spreading provoked the recipients to laughter. But when the week's allowance of meat was doled out, and it was black and limp, with a stench that was far from appetising, then people were no longer moved to mirth, they could only turn away in disgust.

So greatly did the German nation suffer that much labour was needed in the sequel to raise it from its misery.

The Tromholt household suffered with the rest. What good were those millions to them now? Neuheide, which would have tided them over these evil days—for Steffen need but have settled down on his estate as his own manager—had been sold.

In the town there were still many hidden streams where one could replenish one's secret stores, and Brigitte devoted herself to seeking them out.

She would sally forth early, dressed in the shabbiest clothes she could lay hands on, an American oilcloth shopping-bag rolled up under her arm, and would accost the women who stood about looking as if they had nothing to sell. Or she would loiter beside the empty shop windows, and, despite the apparent lack of goods, would enter, asking to see the owner. Thus, many a forbidden purchase was made, and the shopping-bag became so full that Brigitte arrived home exhausted and breathless from her efforts.

Still, nothing mattered so long as Steffen was kept well fed. If only she could spread a little butter on his bread, could serve him with fresh and appetising vegetables; so long as he could, occasionally, relish a little beefsteak; what matter if one went hungry oneself? She felt happy, and tricked him on all possible occasions, saying: "I had my dinner in the kitchen, hours ago," or "I must be careful, otherwise I'll be getting fatter than ever. A little fasting can do me no harm." What had she got an inventive faculty for, if she could not make good use of it on occasion?

And in truth she became thinner, and looked prettier and younger than ever. People did not laugh behind her back, and Steffen could walk peacefully by her side without feeling distressed. But her forehead was sometimes far too white, and the light was easily quenched from her eyes; only the paint-box colouring in her cheeks was still there, though at times it was nothing more than the tiniest of flushes. She fainted, too, at unlooked-for moments; but since she recovered for the most part before any one found her, she did not need to mention it.

Above all nothing must be said to Atta, who was at home once more, her wits and eyes sharpened by her experience as a nurse.

The girl had been nursing for two and a half years, when she broke down. Night duty had been too much for her; also she had never shirked her share of the ward-maid's jobs, though mostly the

young ladies of good family had been excused this drudgery. She did all the less savoury parts of a nurse's work as if to the manner born. What tired her most of all was the constant going up and down stairs with food, twenty times during every meal, four flights either way, till at last her legs gave out, and she got an inflammation of the knee-joint.

She was sent home to rest and recuperate; and lay on a couch, making a wry face, and being waited on by Mummy.

Her leave lengthened; and in the end she was not taken back, being regarded as physically unfit for further service.

Once again, therefore, she haunted the rooms of her home, aloof, wrapped in her own meditations; she practised the fiddle, and wrote poetry.

She did not glory in the deeds of valour ascribed to her fatherland. Like her mother she was at once too modest and too proud for anything of the sort. By degrees, a moody trend, an inclination to childish reverie, was transformed into a conscious realisation of her own worth.

So many poor fellows had looked up to her with devotion and wonderment, so many trembling souls had accepted her kindly services with reverent awe; how could she escape from a feeling of exalted self-esteem? Even now she was still being called upon to bestow her gifts of mercy and consolation. Letters came in dozens, the addresses written with laboured care, revealing the toilworn fist of a working

man; and the contents might well have provoked laughter if they had not been so moving.

There had also been an officers' ward in the hospital. She had not liked having to go on duty there, but had been obliged to from time to time. Certain of the gentlemen were inclined to take liberties—not with her, it is true—but with some of the other nurses; and the young women would giggle together and whisper in corners or passages. Besides, it might appear as if she was man-hunting in the hope of finding a husband.

Still, as a result of her occasional activities in this ward, she received letters on fine notepaper, with crest, and coat of arms on the seal, and written in an educated hand.

These missives were not passed round for the family to enjoy; and yet, in the end, Mummy was allowed to read them—how could one find the heart to keep a secret from her!—and she would retail the contents to Steffen, and would discuss the advances made by one correspondent or another.

Atta would sit up till midnight writing the most beautiful letters imaginable, regular guardian-angel epistles, to Rifleman X and to Grenadier Y; and in the morning there would be a packet of such correspondence on the kitchen table waiting for the maid to drop into the pillar box.

Of course there were others besides; but these she posted herself; and it was only the increasingly cordial tone adopted by a certain Captain Haake which

informed Brigitte whither her daughter's affections were tending.

She was careful not to interfere. Events must grow naturally out of the course of things. The affair must be safeguarded against intrusion by unauthorized persons.

Gradually the letters bearing the coronets grew less frequent; then they ceased altogether. Only those from Captain Haake continued to come in regular succession.

One day he appeared upon the scene. Sent in two cards, and asked if he might see the lady of the house. Everything done in due form!

Brigitte's heart beat perceptibly faster as she looked up at him. She knew that, in him, the future had entered the house.

This future appeared in the shape of a man of medium height, very lean and austere of aspect, about thirty-five years of age, with short-cropped, black hair which encroached far down on to his forehead, and with dark, fiery eyes. He limped, and had to help himself along with a stick; his left arm hung stiffly at his side. When he approached Brigitte and shook her proffered hand, she felt that every muscle of his body was taut as for a spring, and in his face she read the signs of an unbending will.

"With this man," she thought, "my child will find security and protection," and she turned her head aside, to conceal the tears which had sprung unbidden to her eyes.

She quickly pulled herself together, so that he was unaware of her emotion. They had hardly been conversing for three minutes before it became clear that he had come as a wooer. For he did not speak of himself, but of his family, his parents and brothers, and the filial duties that devolved upon him. He did not waste precious time on commonplace and conventional subjects, so eager was he to initiate the mother of the girl he loved into the intimacies of his own life.

She listened to all he had to say, and, herself, contributed little to the conversation. Indeed, she had taken to speaking less and less lately, in spite of the fact that her mind was more active than ever. But she asked relevant questions. So well, forsooth, did she practise the art of questioning, that all those who came to seek her advice opened their hearts to her, placing absolute trust in her judgment and discretion.

So it was now. After half an hour's talk alone with Captain Leo Haake, she knew everything there was to know about him.

Then she got up and rang.

If Master was in his studio, would he be so good as to come down; a gentleman had called. And Miss Atta, too, was requested to come to the drawing-room.

Miss Atta was the first to obey. At sight of Captain Haake she blushed deeply, but soon got the

better of her surprise, and assumed her high-priestess expression.

"Little silly," thought Brigitte.

Then he was put through his paces, made to walk up and down the room to see how he had got on; and while "Sister" congratulated him on his progress, he poured out his thanks for all her care.

Finally, Steffen presented himself. He was a trifle peevish at the outset, because of being disturbed at his work—a very rare occurrence if the truth must be told. When he learned the visitor's name, however, he became alert and cordial.

Going straight to the point, he asked the gallant captain what his prospects were.

Curt and clear came the necessary information. Haake would not resume active service in his regiment, for he had been invited to serve on the general staff, and there was no need to expatiate upon the significance of that. But supposing he was to be invalided out of the army—and really he had been so riddled with bullets that his body was nothing but a sieve—then—then . . .

The soldier could speak no further.

Steffen thought: "If the worst comes to the worst, there are always my millions to fall back upon." The man was a congenial fellow. In addition, he was one of those to whom one owed a debt of gratitude for all they had sacrificed.

Thus matters seemed to be arranging themselves for the best.

. Captain Haake came a second, and then a third time; he was invited with other guests to an evening meal at which the pièce de résistance was a couple of geese sent as a gift by Herr Piefke. The captain took Atta in to dinner, and Brigitte noticed with pleasure how well the girl knew the knack of giving him the support he needed.

"A noble choice," observed Maxel who sat on his hostess's right.

And his wife, the little canaille, who had grown fairer and more coquettish with the passage of the years, said, leaning over the table:

"It does not matter that she is taller than he; on the contrary, she'll thus always be able to look over and beyond him."

Brigitte pressed her lips tightly together, and was happy that no one but herself and Maxel had overheard the innuendo.

Hitherto there had been no definite proposal; and Steffen, who was kept informed by Brigitte, was beginning to think that nothing was coming of the affair, until one evening after dark he ran up against Haake, near the house, but not coming thither. The captain seemed a trifle confused by the encounter. He explained his presence in that quarter by saying that it was a good place to practise walking in, whereas in the crowded central streets he felt awkward and uneasy. No, he wouldn't come in, thanks; he had an appointment.

When Steffen reached home, he asked the maid where Atta might be.

Miss Atta had gone out not so very long ago. She had wanted to take the air for a little while.

He immediately went to Brigitte, who, as usual, was sitting over her needlework, and told her of his discoveries.

Brigitte smiled indulgently, saying:

"Let her be. I'm pretending to see and hear nothing. She'll tell me in her own good time."

These words appeased him. He had not been able to refrain from recalling his own youth when the Berlin girls of the West End had run after him so persistently. But that was quite another kettle of fish!

An hour later when Atta took her place at the supper table, her cheeks were fiery red and her eyes full of a dreamy happiness.

Steffen and Brigitte looked at one another, but they said nothing.

One Sunday afternoon the captain was expected. He had asked if he might drop in to tea, and Brigitte had said he would be welcome.

When Steffen, tired of his own company, came down the studio stairs in the dusk, he saw Brigitte standing finger on lips, cautioning him to tread softly.

"They are together now," she whispered, "and are talking themselves out."

He took her hand in his, and they stood for a long

time, waiting, till destiny should have been fulfilled.

Then, at last, the centre door was flung wide, and Atta appeared in the opening with the lame soldier following her. She was radiant, and in the joy of her new experience she did in truth assume the aspect of a priestess.

Yet when she caught sight of her mother, and, with a sob, flung her arms round Brigitte's neck, she became once more a little maid. Steffen went up to the captain and the two men shook hands. . . .

Not a word had been spoken.

Only when they sat round the table, and Brigitte was busied in pouring out tea, did she break the silence:

"Do you like yours strong, or weak?"

"Strong, please."

Silence again for a while. An occasional tear rolled into a tea-cup.

At last they all came to life again—they had to return sooner or later. But how they accomplished this feat, not one of the four was ever able to say.

Life was now a hard taskmaster, and required tenfold exertions on the part of its thralls.

Soon afterwards, Haake was transferred to the general staff. So far, so good—but six months later the general staff had vanished from the face of the earth. Armistice and revolution had swept it into the gutter.

The irrational persecution of every one entitled to the name of officer was in full swing. Men who

had weathered a hundred battles, who had gone hungry and cold during four long years, who had suffered from illness and given their life's blood without stint, now had their epaulettes torn off as if the wearers were criminals. A man ran the risk of being killed if he appeared in uniform on the street; nor, if he were assaulted, did he dare raise a hand in self-defence, lest the mob tear him to pieces.

One last time did Leo Haake venture to wear his gay uniform; it was on the occasion of his wedding, when Atta walked at his side.

He hardly limped at all now.

'Twas the world that limped along in his stead. No chance of promotion even for the most capable of men. Nothing but pushers and swindlers and profiteers—riff-raff ready to bleed the exhausted fatherland of its last drop of blood—could come to the fore. They rose rapidly to wealth and power, while the others stood helplessly looking on, no longer capable of distinguishing what was right and what was might, nor could they reckon their own worth.

"Never mind," thought Steffen, "my millions are still available."

With them he could provide for his own household, and could tide the young couple over the first difficulties, until a better day should dawn.

Two or three years passed by. Leo Haake was preparing himself for the consular service.

But what was this? One fine day Steffen's mil-

lions were no longer there! Or, rather, they had grown to milliards and thousands of milliards! The only pity was that this inconceivable sum of money was not worth the paper it was printed on!

"We are poor," said Steffen to Brigitte on returning from the bank where he had been to enquire as to the state of his resources.

She could not refrain from the thought:

"Ah, if only we still had Neuheide!"

But she was careful not to annoy him even by so much as a sigh of regret.

She smiled, as she always smiled when he had done something foolish, or when a great and well-nigh insupportable trouble crossed his path, which was her path too.

And in her smile there was no trace of reproach, or superiority, or bland forgiveness, there was not even commiseration—all that was there to be seen was comfort, and hope, and a boundless trust.

"My Stephenson is so clever, he can do everything. He'll find a way out of this misfortune, likewise."

Her words carried him over the first and most difficult stage.

CHAPTER XXX

But Steffen Tromholt was ungrateful.

He paid no heed to the all-pervading solicitude of the woman who made it her one business to hide from him the difficulty of housekeeping on so narrow a margin; he never noticed the way in which every farthing was skilfully expended to help in producing the impression that things were much as they had been in the old days.

He was not aware that Brigitte had reopened the relationships which during the time of war and starvation had enabled her to make many a useful purchase; that even now she had found ingenious expedients for keeping the wolf from the door; that she once again walked the streets with the American oilcloth bag, and staggered under its weight when, with a happy smile, she bore it home in triumph after hours of peregrination.

All that he saw was that with his depreciated paper money and the ludicrously small income from his paintings, it had become impossible for him to continue his customary mode of life, which was conceived in the grand style and entailed numerous obligations.

He had to give a monthly contribution to the expenses of the young married couple, for the future consul was not as yet in receipt of a salary. He was

paying pensions to retired servants, even to some of the Neuheide staff who had been overlooked in the deed of sale, and now waited anxiously for the postal remittances that their former master was in the habit of sending them. Then in Munich was a young sempstress with a little child. She was out of work, and also needed help.

Not merely did these multifarious claims deplete a purse which was by no means well filled. In addition, his financial worries deprived him of the repose essential to his work. From the depths of the half-forgotten, there surged up the old plaint: "What the devil have all these things to do with me? Why on earth did I ever burden myself with the cares and responsibilities of marriage, which seems to have had no other object than to rob me of my joy in creation?"

He was careful to keep this belated revolt from Brigitte's knowledge. But she knew him too well not to be aware of what was going on.

When she surprised him sucking a pipe that was long since cold, brooding disconsolately, waiting for happy thoughts which were ever slower in coming, she would steal up behind him and lovingly caress his head—an endearment he still tolerated—and say with a smile which reflected the whole of his misery:

"Poor old Steffen!"

At such times he would take the hand which weighed so heavily on him, and press it to his lips, while he thought:

"How could I get on without her?"

Indeed, they often had pleasant evenings together in the studio. He seldom went down to the living-rooms now; they were too large and dreary for his present mood, electric light had to be economised; and when he sat at the big, round table, which had been enlivened in days gone by with the girls' prattle, and where now Brigitte sat so far away from him (right at the opposite side as if she had ceased to belong to him), with the red brocade runner between them like a river of blood—he shuddered at the immeasurable void into which his life had been plunged.

But up here, in his studio, he felt at home. Protected by the three-piece screen whose Gobelin tapestries encompassed him like a dusky wood, half reclining upon the Turkish divan, an engrossing book propped up among the cushions—a man might await the advent of old age and fare worse.

And it was all the better when a hesitant hand knocked at the door, and, at his "Come in," a face would peep through the crack, and a sweet, rather husky voice would enquire, "Shall I bother you if I come to sit here?"

Far from it! Hardly once in all these years had she come to him in anything but a friendly spirit. Her mere proximity gave him a sense of relaxation and deliverance, even though a moment before they had been having one of their most unseemly

wrangles—wherein he, as usual, had been the aggressor.

Then she would make him lie down comfortably, stretch himself at full length, and she would sit between his two feet, using the screen to lean against.

They would make plans. When their affairs had been straightened out, what would they do?

They would go for a little journey—to Copenhagen, let us say.

Nearly always it was Copenhagen. But why this choice? Who could tell? As far as he was concerned, the design had nothing whatever to do with that young woman he had met in Paris before the war. For both of them, the Danish metropolis had been the object of many an imaginary pilgrimage long ere that encounter.

The more they became confirmed stay-at-homes, the more they would delight in such spiritual voyagings. They would fly on the wings of fancy to foreign countries and to other continents, where an endless series of landscapes and incidents and pictures would pass before their eyes. Since, among all world capitals, Copenhagen was the nearest, they liked to toy with the thought of beginning their travels by a visit to that town. But the project never got beyond the realm of dreams. Thus, half in mockery and half in resignation, they would entertain themselves with the childish game, contenting themselves with shadow in place of substance. Many an hour of

sorrowful happiness had been spent in this amusement; Brigitte would laugh care away, as if she were the cricket of the fable and had nothing better to fill her days with than singing. Under the spell of her cheerful and hope-bringing placidity, many a trouble would clear up; and of the vast sea of bitterness, one drop alone remained: "So it will go on to the end."

Yet, no! It cannot, it must not go on to the end like this. Destiny, in some shape or the other, must be waiting among the shadows of the unexpected, ready for the man who should dare to grip it and make it his, as a curse or as a blessing!

For the present, however, there was nothing to be done but to let life take its course, to allow deterioration in general and one's own deterioration in particular to progress as fate decreed. A man who in the past had been used to enjoy the generous gifts of fortune, must now rest content with the crumbs which a niggardly hand was meting out to him.

One evening, at the beginning of the month, when the various allowances had been sent off, sums of money which they could less and less afford to alienate from their personal housekeeping, Brigitte said:

"I'm always thinking out fresh ways in which to economise. If we start selling our carpets and pictures everybody will say we are bankrupt—and of course I cannot allow that. But there is Loni to think of in Munich, with her little boy. We must see that they get enough to eat—I owe at least so much to my poor son. Yet, send what we may, it

does no good. The lass goes on worrying and fretting nevertheless. And, with it all, she has remained so sweet and lovable, just as she ever was."

Brigitte had been to see her once every year; she wished to keep an eye on the girl her Kurt had loved, and to watch how the child was developing.

"What about transplanting the two of them here? Loni could join our household as a kind of daughter, and gradually take Grete's place as housekeeper —in any case we'll soon be losing Grete, since she is thinking of getting married and settling down in a home of her own."

"Wouldn't the kid be rather a nuisance?"

"We could put him out to nurse, and he might be brought on a visit every Sunday. Or, if the cook objects to that on moral grounds, Loni could go and see him at his foster-mother's. She would do as she liked in the matter. And we'd take pleasure in the child, too—only of course that is quite a secondary consideration, and has not influenced me at all in making the proposal. I should like you to have—when I—am gone . . . I should like you to have a loving and affectionate soul near you, until you can get married again . . ."

This thought was not new to him. For years now, she had spoken of her death as if it were coming shortly. There was no trace of coquetry in the way she mentioned it, as if she were fishing for some word from him, expostulating that he could not get on without her. She referred to it quite peacefully

and familiarly, as a child on a visit speaks of the father who is soon coming along to fetch it home.

Often, when she was overcome with faintness, or was painfully catching her breath, death seemed very near; but she had always recovered, so that he had ceased to believe that her heart trouble could be serious, and had begun to reckon on her attaining a venerable age.

Because, during the famine years, her figure had got slimmer, and she had thereby become more active, she, too, thought her health must have improved. Steffen, naturally, encouraged such a belief.

But she could not keep her mind from the contemplation of that dark future when she would no longer be there to comfort him; and he often watched her spinning the threads which would bind her soul to his from beyond the tomb.

He, as in duty bound, tried to laugh her out of her preoccupation with death, though at bottom his thoughts lingered in the realm of the shades almost as much as hers; but this was in the subconscious, for he had built a black wall separating him from the abyss of loneliness in which he would have to dwell after she had gone.

To-day, as always, he began by rejecting what she had planned for his salvation; but she persisted, and repeated her request so often that at length, for peace' sake, he yielded.

A home was soon found for the boy. Brigitte

journeyed south; and three days later she returned with a shy, fair-haired young creature, and a lively, leather-breeched youngster.

Loni was now well on in the twenties; but she was exactly the same as the first day when he and Brigitte had gone a-hunting, and had run her down to her little garret.

She found it hard to accept the reality of the happiness that had befallen her, and seemed at first to live in constant fear lest she should be banished from her new-found paradise; she went about the house noiselessly, like a ray of light, her great, innocent, questioning eyes looking as if a piece of the sky had fallen into the room; and if you had told any one that this was the mother of a strapping lad who was already covering his slate with letters, you would have been laughed at for your pains.

Both the master and the mistress were careful that no one should learn of this; and when Brigitte went to see her grandson, it was with as much secrecy as when Loni herself went to see the child.

Brigitte came home from these excursions with such an ineffable sweetness radiating from her whole person that Steffen could not resist the temptation to tease her about the joys of grandmotherhood.

Thus a new source of happiness had entered the house. There was nothing much to show for it—at least Steffen found it difficult to say just what the change was. But it created an atmosphere of word-

less affection and quietly sorrowful thoughts; and the joy at having pulled a long nose at conventional morality certainly had something to do with it.

About this time, too, the Tromholts' financial situation was eased.

And who should the saviour be but Herr Piefke!

He presented himself one day in his yellow shoes and red silk socks, a brand-new homespun of many tints, varying from sky blue to dark brown, covering his portly frame.

"What may I do for you?"

"Well, now, Herr Professor, you just listen to me. I'm in possession of that fine old manor house of yours. You'd installed the place up to the nines, I tell you—and every one agrees with me. There's only one thing to complain about. You see it's like this. Sometimes fine people come to look over the place and they say—of course my sort don't understand about these things, otherwise I'd have had the deed drawn up differently and stipulated that all the pictures by the previous owner were to be left hanging on the walls—half a million more or less was nothing to me then! But, as I was saying, when these fine folks come and look around, they say: 'If you really bought the manor from Tromholt, why are none of his pictures here?' You see? Genuine Tromholts, that's what I've set my heart on having, and you've just got to supply them, see? I'd like a nice little piece in the dining-room, for instance—a style, let me see, what did the man say—oh, well,

I've forgotten the name—but the painting ought to be something that'll be suitable to a place where one eats."

"Al fresco, perhaps?" Steffen thought he might stoop to this old chestnut with such a simple-minded customer, and was taken aback when Piefke took the jest quite seriously.

"Yes, yes, that's it! I was sure it had something to do with fresh air. Well now, what d'you think of it?"

Steffen knew that the work promised to bring in funds which would put new life into his household. He reflected for a moment, but finally made up his mind to turn down the offer.

"I'm sure you'll understand—or, maybe, you won't—but I love my old home far too well to be able to loaf around there painting, now that it is no longer mine."

"Yes, of course," said Piefke, smoothing his clean-shaven chin. "It's none so lively when a man's been lord of the manor and now another is wearing his shoes. But you know, this fresh-stuff—don't they call it 'still life,' too, sometimes?—at least I feel as if some one had proposed a thing with a name like that—well, what I was about to say was—couldn't you do it here, in this workshop of yours? What have we got a parcels' delivery service for, I should like to know!"

Steffen explained where the difficulty lay.

"But," he continued, "if you are really set on my

painting the thing for you and will agree to my doing some panneaus, I think it can be managed."

"Whose nose?"

Steffen cleared up this difficulty, too, and, soon after, the matter was arranged.

Herr Piefke did not offer an outstanding price.

"You see, the days when I was flush are over, absolutely gone to pot," said he.

Still, the sums he paid for the work sufficed to keep the Tromholts' heads above water for three months or so.

"Didn't I tell you," said Brigitte, "things can't go against us? And to think that you are to beautify a place which, no matter who happens to be in possession, is really our home and will always remain our home! Just fancy the joy of it! Who ever could have imagined such happiness!"

In the turn of a phrase, she had managed to expunge the last trace of bitterness from his heart.

He set to work.

At about the same period an event took place which shook Brigitte and Steffen to the soul—though he did his best to appear indifferent.

Susi was back in Germany.

She returned in triumph, for her husband had become a celebrity.

While Germany, shut away from the world, had vegetated amid wretched dreams of famine, beyond her frontiers great things had been taking place in the realm of art. The gods of yester-year had fallen

from their pedestals, and new gods had arisen from the dark abode of chaos and been set up in their stead.

Among these new gods was the young Russian to whom Susi had bound herself for life. Chicago, the art-loving centre of the butchering trade, had "discovered" him. He had performed on one of the gilded pianos that adorn the drawing-rooms in Fifth Avenue, and had not only played to the company after dinner, but once—would you believe it?—had entertained his patron's guests before they betook themselves to table! Toscanini had produced the young composer's opera at the Scala in Milan. And even London waxed enthusiastic over his merits.

But the seal had not yet been set upon his fame, and that could only be affixed by Berlin, despite poverty and humiliation, despite the fact that Germany was still excluded from the comity of nations.

It was to obtain this final sanction that Sokoloff had come to Berlin.

On an evening at the beginning of March, a messenger from the Esplanade stood ringing at the Tromholts' front-door bell. He brought a letter; and when Brigitte, who was sitting at supper with Steffen, read the address, she gave a little cry of joy.

Her heart beat so furiously that she had to lean back in her chair and rest, while Steffen took the envelope from her hand. Although he, too, recognised the writing, he did not feel he had any right to open it, since Susi had not written to him, per-

sonally, for years; and when she did condescend to show a sign of life—precious seldom at the best of times, and, during the war, never at all—she did not include a word of greeting to him, nor give the slightest sign that she remembered him.

Brigitte, as soon as she felt strong enough, read the letter in silence, and, still without uttering a word, handed it to her husband.

It ran as follows:

"Darling Mummy,

"We got here to-day. Boris is playing to-morrow at the Philharmonic. I can't come to see you at home. Even if I wished to do so, Boris would not give his consent. Daddy was so antagonistic to my marriage, that I fear there is no possibility of a reconciliation. And I naturally back Boris up in this matter, as I do in everything else. Could you come and have lunch with me at our hotel? We'll be just our two selves, for Boris makes it a rule to see no strangers at all on the day he is playing at a concert. I'm just off to see Atta. I hope you'll be able to come. If you *are* able, I'll be waiting for you in the hall at twelve-thirty. Your most loving daughter,

"Susi."

If she is "able"!

She turned beseeching eyes on Steffen, as much as to say: "Forgive." But they had come to a branching of the ways and her will severed her inevitably from him.

He nodded his assent.

"This is your punishment," cried a voice in his ear. Yes, his punishment! And amazingly mild, when he came to think of it.

Brigitte could get no wink of sleep that night, nor did he either.

At three in the morning he still heard her panting, and sobbing for breath. He went to her room, and snuggled into bed beside her. As he lay in her arms and noted how her breathing gradually became easier and more regular, he could not but remember the many nights when he in his despair had found peace in these same arms.

She, too, thought of those nights, and said abruptly:

"Do you know what I imagined that time when you had such an extraordinary idea and employed a detective to watch Boris?"

"Well?"

"I fancied you were head over heels in love with Susi!"

The bedside lamp was still burning, so he sat up to get a better view of her face.

The smile of an indulgent mother lit up her features; she had almost entirely recovered from her heart attack, though her breath was even now a little laboured.

At last he was to know the answer to the riddle which had always baffled him. And yet there was no answer to the enigma even now.

"If you really believed that, how was it you in-

sisted on her spending the summer at home? And how could you risk leaving us alone together that last day?"

She looked pensive, and a tiny spark of cunning twinkled in her eye.

"What better thing could I do? If I had parted you from her, some terrible misfortune might have happened. Besides, I knew you and I knew my child too well. I knew to whom I was entrusting her. Of course you went through a pretty bad time, but I'm not so sure you realised yourself what was the matter with you."

He made no answer, but he thought the more: thought her an angel for her marvellous insight, and an angel for her marvellous failure of insight; was within an ace of blurting out the whole story; but, in the end, refrained. How could he venture to disturb her blissful quietude, as she lay there smiling in anticipation of to-morrow's joy?

He switched off the light, and they both fell asleep, with Susi's presence hovering over them.

Brigitte had made herself look her smartest and prettiest to lunch with her daughter. It was not often now that the Tromholts had a chance of going to such a fine hotel as the Esplanade for a meal. Besides, she wished to show a brave front to Susi, to let her daughter imagine that their life was still on the old sumptuous footing. She put on her finest cloak, a relic of more prosperous days, and her cheeks were as bright and as fresh as in her youth.

"You look like a young bride, my dear," he teased, as she said good-bye. But his heart was heavy, even as he jested.

When she got back about four, she had no end of things to tell him.

He realised for the first time how completely they were cut off from the world. Atta, too, for that matter. There had been articles in all the papers, welcoming the young artist back to Berlin, there were huge bills plastering all the kiosks, and, in the illustrated journals, Susi's portrait appeared side by side with that of her husband.

Brigitte drew the page from her pocket, her face beaming with gratified vanity.

It was thus he saw Susi's face again for the first time, after all these years. She had grown into a fine lady, with a stately carriage and a confident expression in her eyes; and cosmopolitanism peeped from every buttonhole of her husband's smartly tailored evening suit.

Steffen had let her go away into a life of poverty; as a little queen she now looked from on high at him and his dwarfed existence.

Brigitte was ready at six to start off for the concert. She had tried to keep a tight hand over her excitement, but when it came to putting her diamond earrings on, she simply could not do it, so tremulous were her hands.

"Susi's going to sit with us; I'm to be on her right,

and Atta on her left; while Leo is to be just behind. Oh, if only you could be there too!"

Joy and sorrow, balancing one another in the scales!

In his anxiety on Brigitte's account, he phoned to his son-in-law: "Keep your eye on Mummy, and take her away as soon as it seems to be exciting her unduly."

Leo having promised, Steffen drove off with her to the Bernburger Strasse, where the crowd of music lovers was thronging the doors of the concert hall.

She held both his hands in hers, and did not want him to leave her; but, in the end, he made her let go. Even if the box-office had still been working, it went against the grain to go and buy a ticket and to sit as a stranger separated from his dear ones.

He watched Brigitte as she disappeared in the crowd.

Should he go home? No! He knew that it would be hours before he could hope to hear her key turn in the lock, and he would be eating his heart out all the time. He had better wait till the concert was over before going home, sit in the Excelsior Café and browse on the papers, unless, maybe, he'd be happier prowling about the streets. . . .

The moon hung crystal-clear above the glistening roofs. The streets were damp from the previous night's frost. Everywhere, loving couples were strolling along, as it is seemly they should do in the spring-time of the year. Whispering pairs, lost to

all the world, gazing into one another's eyes. Shy looks of longing in the faces of such as had not found a mate. A giant market-place for the young folk yearning to "keep company."

As he, all unbeknownst, wandered amid this world of love, his own love-life rose vividly before his mind. One female form followed another in the silvery light.

He left out of account chance amours, everything that had been the expression of caprice or levity on one side or the other. These were drops that had slipped back into the ocean without leaving a ripple. Of great experiences there had been since his marriage no more than three.

First of all, the benefactress of the Dresden days, whom he had met twice only, and whose name, since she had wished to remain unknown, he hesitated to shape in his mind even to-day. Then there had been her daughter, so little like her, the feather-brained Serene Highness, seized with the fancy of surrendering her married maidenhood to the artist whose letters to the dead mother had inflamed her starving senses. Then, there had been Susi. That had been the most tremendous, the most ardent of all his experiences. Criminal in essence, undoubtedly, and dogging every footstep with deadly peril.

Had he gone too far, Susi would never have survived; nor would Brigitte; nor he himself.

Gratitude surged up within him as he thought of the woman who had saved them.

She was sitting there in the concert hall, listening to the music which that man he had once hated, that man who was now so indecently well dressed, was conjuring forth from the piano. No doubt she would be clasping her daughter's hand, just as she had clasped his before she went in.

How was it possible that this daughter, because of whom in that vanished year he had only been able to sleep with a revolver under his temple, could be nothing now to him? Yet it was so! His sole concern was with Brigitte; it was for Brigitte's sake that he was roaming the streets like this.

Would not to-day's joys be too much for her? Would her heart bear the strain?

He'd better get back to the exit, take up his station there, wait till the doors opened and she appeared amid the issuing crowd.

There he stood, shoulder to shoulder with the menservants and the maidservants, all on the alert.

There he stood, till the first stragglers appeared, thickening speedily into a flood, and until, out of that emerging flood, a familiar hand was lifted to his shoulder, and a laughing voice cried: "Oh, how lovely it has been! Oh, how lovely!"

His anxiety was appeased. Susi sank back into the shades.

Two days later she left Berlin, and he never saw her again.

That same spring, Atta's husband was to begin his work as vice-consul in Smyrna.

It seemed a distressing thing that this daughter of his, so inexperienced, should travel out into the wide world.

Brigitte put a bold front on the matter, even in the hour of parting. Her eyes were dry; but in the look with which she followed the departing pair, there was a pain like that of those who are looking at the coffins of their dear ones.

Steffen knew well enough what she was feeling, but would not show his knowledge. Instead, he began to talk jocularly of a Mediterranean tour he and Brigitte would take together, and she smiled appreciatively.

When they were back in the spacious rooms of their flat, in the rooms that were never again to be animated by Sunday visits from their children, Brigitte, clasping her hands, said to him:

"Now we are quite alone in the world."

"That is true enough," he answered, thinking how poor his life had become; and he hastened to withdraw to his own quarters, lest within her hearing he should give vent to the mocking laughter which bade fair to choke him.

Book Four
THREE BY THEMSELVES

CHAPTER XXXI

Two months later, on a brilliant May afternoon, Loni came tripping up to the studio, and, tossing her golden hair back from her eyes, eagerly gave her message:

"The mistress told me to tell you a strange lady has come, and that I had shown her to the drawing room by mistake, and would Master like her to come up here."

"Didn't she give you a card?"

"Yes, but I left it on Mistress's table downstairs."

"Well, go and get it."

"I don't like to."

"Why not?"

"The ladies are talking and laughing. They seem to be enjoying themselves."

"You've only got to say Master would like to see the card. There'll be nothing in that to annoy the visitor."

But Loni stuck to her guns.

"Afterwards Mistress said it would be a great surprise for Master."

"She did, did she? All right, I'll come down."

He pulled off his overall and went.

He heard the two women's voices as they prattled gaily. They might have been old acquaintances who had not met for some time, telling one another all the news.

But when he entered the drawing-room it was to find a stranger, a tall woman, well-proportioned and stately, who rose to greet him. Those flashing blue eyes with which she glanced at him victoriously and perhaps a little mockingly from under the brim of her hat; surely he knew them?

Yes, it must be she.

He flushed hotly.

"Madame? Mademoiselle Astrid! Quel miracle! Vraiment c'est vous?"

"You need not hesitate to speak German, Master," she said in the clear tones he had not heard for so many years. "I have been studying the language diligently, so I hope you will not often find occasion to correct me."

She stretched out a narrow, delicately gloved hand, the hand he had once seen gripping the mane of the property horse.

Brigitte laughed triumphantly as she said:

"Well, has the surprise come off?"

He sharpened his wits in the effort to remember how much he had told his wife about Astrid. Certainly not that sitting for the nude, for he would not have given his friend away. But unquestionably, both in his letters and by word of mouth, he had referred with admiration to her self-possessed ways among the amorous painter folk.

He besieged Astrid with questions. Did she still live in Paris? Where had she been during the war?

Why had she never come to see him on her way through Berlin?

Her answers were brief and to the point, though somewhat evasive none the less. She had not been in Paris since the first year of the war. As for looking him up in Berlin, she could not do that before, as she had felt rather rueful at the abrupt way in which she had cut short their acquaintance.

But she had seen his pictures all over the place; in German galleries; even in England . . . Here she broke off.

He listened with delight to the silvery ring of her voice. She spoke German, now, almost as well as her native tongue. Just a shade in the intonation, and a word wrongly stressed here and there, were all that betrayed the foreigner.

Brigitte wanted to know whether she thought of staying long in Berlin.

"That depends," Astrid answered, looking at Steffen in a way that puzzled him, half pleadingly and half challengingly. "But I will speak of my plans by-and-by." Then, jumping up: "I wonder if you will let me see your studio?"

As he nodded assent, he thought: "How often I used to wish for this!" But he kept the reflection to himself, and motioned her towards the passage that led to the winding stair. She turned, and asked Brigitte:

"Aren't you coming too?"

Her hostess refused, with a smile, having no inclination to thrust in when Steffen was paying homage to another woman, whether as artist or as man.

In the studio, the panneaus for Neuheide occupied the foreground. Two of them, *Luna and Endymion* and its counterpart *Acis and Galatea*, were finished; two others had just been sketched in. He had plundered Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with the mischievous design of giving Piefke's highbrow visitors a few nuts to crack. That worthy himself was only interested in the nudity of the figures. The less drapery the goddesses wore, the more would they stir his guests' senses, and he looked forward to a stimulating accompaniment to his entertainments.

Night was drawing near. The red glow in the northwestern sky was flooding the studio through the great window. The pictures were not seen to advantage, and the moonlight in *Luna and Endymion* had lost its satiny sheen. He stretched out his hand towards the bamboo pole, intending to draw the curtains, but she stopped him.

"No, Master! This is only craftsman's work, and lighting can make it neither better nor worse. Of course the man who fixes these panels to his walls will be a lucky fellow. But for my part, I should like to see something which is really and truly your own work."

He was discountenanced, and bit his lip. It was long since any one had spoken to him in such a tone. Rarely did he admit a colleague to his studio, Maxel

least of all. Indeed, Maxel hardly ever wanted to come. As for Brigitte, who so aptly guided his brush, it was her way to see nothing but the best in his work.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Don't you think that the artist must be ruled by what he has to do? That he must subordinate his own individuality to it?"

"Need he push that subordination so far as to extinguish his individuality?"

Being wounded, he read into her words a disdain she had not meant to imply.

"Here in Germany," he rejoined, "we painters are pestered by so many moral demands that only the incompetent can comply with them. It surprises me all the more that you, animated as you are by the Gallic sense of art, are not ashamed to join in this chorus of detraction. Please tell me one thing, at least; whether you think the flesh tints in the panneaus are satisfactory."

"They are splendid. In France I have seen very few artists who can compare with you in that respect."

"You admit that there is some of my individuality in them, after all?"

"I'm afraid I have offended you, Master."

He turned the matter over in his mind for a moment, and then said emphatically:

"Indeed you have, Fräulein Helsted!"

"Not Fräulein, if you don't mind. I was married . . ."

The "was" gave him a jar. He enquired:

"And now you are not?"

"No," she said, in so cutting a tone that he was afraid to ask any more questions.

She glanced round as if looking for a seat.

He pointed to the couch, in the shadow of the Gobelin screen. With a murmur of thanks, she sat down there, while he stood in front of her.

"Let me show you how unfair you are to me," she said. "When you knew me in Paris, years ago, you were so much interested in my person that you paid very little heed to my paintings. This flattered me, in a way, but it humiliated me as well, for I take my work very seriously indeed. During all the years since we met, I have been dominated by the wish to become your pupil some day or other. That was one of my chief reasons for perfecting my knowledge of German, and the same thing was in my mind when I came to see you to-day. But it only hardened into a definite resolve while I was looking at these pictures of yours."

"And your resolve expressed itself in the form of a criticism of the painter. That seems queer!"

"If you knew me better, you would not be puzzled. I have often been told that I'm an impossible creature. I tell you this as a warning."

He thought: "She must have been through very bad times." Then, aloud:

"No doubt you realise that your warning will count for nothing with me. But, to give you a prompt answer, let me tell you that since the days

when, in my callow youth, I was for a while a teacher at the Academy of Art, I have never had any pupils in the proper sense of the term. I should not have been able to work with some one peering over my shoulder. Least of all, some one like you! But if you like to take a studio, and I may occasionally look you up there . . ."

A pained, somewhat scornful smile lifted one corner of her mouth. He understood without more ado.

"The word 'may' is the wrong one," he admitted, "for it leaves me open to the suspicion that I want to be more, or perhaps less, than a teacher. Replace it by another word, less polite, chosen in accordance with your own taste."

"You are weighing your gestures no less than your words. I am afraid we shall misunderstand one another pretty often."

"There is only one specific against misunderstandings."

"What is that?"

"Mutual trust."

She gazed out into the void.

"Trust? Mutual trust?" A sardonic expression played about her lips once more. "Is there such a thing?"

"What two people wish to exist between them, exists. But it is getting too dark to show you any more of my pictures, and I expect that my wife is waiting for us to come down to tea."

"A wonderful woman, your wife!" She rose from the divan. "Why did you not tell me about her?"

"What do you know of my wife?"

"Not much need for knowledge. I loved her the instant I saw her."

"What were you and she laughing about so merrily?"

"Nothing particular. It was just because I liked her so much."

As they were on their way downstairs, he thought: "It's a good thing that I didn't say a word to Brigitte about her posing for the nude on horseback. If I had not kept a still tongue, her reception would have been less cordial."

For, though his wife was broad-minded in most respects, where feminine modesty was concerned she was censorious. She had never been able to have any pleasanter feeling towards professional models than one of timid compassion.

The tea-urn was steaming, and supper was ready on the dining table. Nothing more than cold meat and boiled eggs, the Tromholts' usual evening meal in these hard days.

"It's long past tea-time," said Brigitte. "But you'll stay to supper with us, of course."

"Nothing I should like better," Astrid answered, promptly taking off her hat. "Is my hair tidy?"

"Quite good enough for simple folk like us. If it were a grand occasion, I don't say . . ."

Instead of bringing her guest to the mirror, she smoothed the tumbled locks with gentle fingers.

Rarely, indeed, would Brigitte touch any one, man or woman, not related to her, in this endearing way; and Steffen was delighted to realise that she must have taken a fancy to the stranger.

"Which of the pictures did you like best?" Brigitte put the question with a confident expectation of appreciative words.

"I paid my respects to the great decorative panels, but the Master would not show me anything else."

"Please drop the word 'Master,' " interjected Steffen. "It's not customary here in Germany, except that it is sometimes used derisively by people who want to express their hidden scorn of all artistic faculty."

"What a hateful world you must live in," she said.

"Not a very agreeable one. It slaughters weaklings, and strengthens only those who can learn to despise it. All the failures, all those who have had to drop out by the way, all those who have tried to master imagination by reason and the creative impulse by frivolity, all the camp followers, the stragglers, the amateurs, and the would-be clever, have interlocked as a phalanx to crucify true ability. A few favourites are exempt, and most of these are formed into a clan of relatives and dependents."

"If I were to accept what you are saying as literal truth," said the Danish visitor with a laugh, "I should

think there was only one thing to do, only one path to follow—that to the nearest travel agency."

"*You* won't notice anything of the sort. On the contrary, you will float on the clouds. There is enthusiasm shown for everybody who promises to become somebody; or, to use the language of these connoisseurs, for everybody whose paper is at a premium. Only when he really has become somebody, perhaps somebody much bigger than they had expected, do they feel that he has disappointed them and done them an injury."

"To hear him talk," said Brigitte, joining in the conversation, as she seldom did when Steffen was airing his views, "one might suppose that he had been more than a little embittered by his experiences. If he were, it would certainly be without cause, for he has all the honours and dignities proper to his merits, and in this period when art is so little appreciated, he is exceptionally well off!"

"You see what she is like," he said, taking Brigitte's hand. "What we call a soothing unguent. She salves every wound, anoints all the chaps in one's skin, and denies every cross as if thereby she could shuffle it out of existence."

"It seems to me that crosses can be shuffled out of existence in such a way," said Astrid. "That is woman's mission. Not mine, of course, for I have no one to help. Wounds and sores and crosses, or what artists speak of as such, are, in the main, products of the imagination, even if there be a core

of reality—and for one who leads the life of the true artist, the dream life, they do not exist."

Steffen and Brigitte looked at one another. Both of them felt that this was shrewd, was a fine saying, and that it introduced a breath of fresh air into the stuffy prison-house in which they were dwelling.

"You must come to see us often," said Brigitte, looking at Astrid gratefully. "If you can manage it, I mean," she added.

"When your husband tells you what we were talking about upstairs, and how he is going to help me, you will see that you will have to put up with a visit from me now and again."

"It is a pity that I shall have to go away soon," said Brigitte. "I am under doctor's orders, and need spa treatment every spring. But before I leave, I shall hope to introduce you to some of our friends."

Astrid thanked her hostess.

"Later on," she said, "when the summer comes, you must visit me in Copenhagen. I have a country house at the seaside, from which I can get into town in twenty minutes by motor."

Steffen and Brigitte burst out laughing. The visitor, naturally, looked at them with some astonishment; whereupon Steffen explained, still laughing:

"We didn't mean to be rude. You have intruded unawares into a connubial secret chamber."

He went on to tell her what "going to Copenhagen" had come to mean for them, and that the expression was pregnant with symbolism.

"In that case I can certainly count on your accepting my invitation," said Astrid, joining heartily in their laughter.

Towards eleven that same evening Steffen accompanied Astrid to the nearest halt, and saw her off in the tram. As he returned, his heart sang within him, like that of a youngster, in the May night:

"A new life! A new life! A new life!"

Brigitte, too, though not exactly joyful, was in higher spirits than usual.

"You're sure to fall in love with her, but I shan't mind. She's worth it."

He protested.

"That would be a misfortune! An old fossil like me, in the middle fifties, and she in the flower of her youth! Besides, I've told you already how utterly unapproachable she is."

Brigitte shook her head, and stared into vacancy.

Again he attempted to protest.

"There, there," she said soothingly, "you've been on famine rations for many years, it's time you had a change. So long as you don't behave unkindly to me, I shan't mind."

"When have I behaved unkindly to you?"

"Thank goodness you've been as nice as can be lately, dear. If you had not, I really don't know how I could have borne life at all. But often when you are in company with a young and beautiful woman, you look askance at me, comparing me with her—and that cuts me to the heart."

"Did I to-day?"

"No, not to-day. To-day you were happy, purely and simply happy. And I was happy for you and with you."

Again he thought:

"Can she honestly feel like that? Is it possible to be so unselfish?"

After all, he had lived through many miracles where she was concerned!

Next day Brigitte came to the studio, a sheet of paper in her hand.

"Here's a list of people I am thinking of inviting to a tea party. It's a long while since we had any friends to see us, and as May is not yet out, most of them will still be here."

Therewith she handed him the paper.

The first name on the list was: "Fru Astrid Helsted."

Yes, that was her maiden name.

"How did you know that was what she was called?"

"Simplicity itself! I merely copied it from the card she left the other day."

The "Fru" gave him a feeling of impending tragedy. But she was still "Helsted." "Well, perhaps she married a cousin," he thought, trying to master his emotion.

He was gripped with the desire to see his house once more a dazzling center of social intercourse.

"What about making a supper party of it, instead?"

"You know very well we can't afford it, dear," she said, facing the impossibility, as she faced life's trials in general, with a cheerful smile. "We'd have to pinch and starve for a long time before we could recoup ourselves for the outlay. Anyway, no one is giving big parties nowadays; we are all of us far too poor."

His thoughts travelled to the black oilcloth bag she still went foraging with from time to time, and he said no more.

When the happy hour arrived, the rooms were radiant in the rosy light of an evening in May. The days of famine and poverty had passed over them without leaving a trace. Not one of the costly and beautiful carpets was gone, not one of the rare old Dutch tiles had been sold to foreigners able to turn the depreciation of German currency to account.

Lovely blossoms, swaying gracefully on their long stalks, wafted their perfume through the flat. One might have imagined they had come straight from Neuheide, as in the old days. Brigitte, accompanied by Loni, had gone early to the market so as to get them cheaper. They would have cost a small fortune if she had waited to buy them at the florist's.

The Old English tea-service, which they had got in the Dresden days, shed its pale-blue lustre over the yellow damask cloth. The only thing there was rather a dearth of was silver, for the Neuheide service had been sold with the house, and had, naturally, never been replaced these hard times.

Came the guests, artist folk and writers, more women than men, for men were rare birds in the Tromholt household. Steffen did not care to rub shoulders with his colleagues outside of their official capacity, and the younger generation kept aloof.

When Astrid appeared in the doorway, a rustle of expectation went through the assembled company; lorgnons were raised, there was whispering, and every one was eager to have a look at the foreigner.

She was wearing a tailor-made costume of rust-red cloth, obviously a Parisian creation. It was lined with gold brocade, which glinted mysteriously when a movement of the wearer made the front fly back. A scarf-collar of the same material as the coat and skirt was flung round her neck, and the Pallas Athene casque which was then the mode imparted a yet severer line to her Grecian profile.

Brigitte advanced joyfully to bid her welcome, and took her from table to table, introducing her to the other guests. But her name did not carry any weight, and with one accord all faces were turned to Steffen as if he would solve the riddle as to the young stranger's identity.

He satisfied their curiosity as best he could, shaking hands formally with Astrid, and making no demur when Brigitte led her guest to the table over which she herself, as hostess, was presiding. Here were some special friends of Brigitte's, women of letters, who were frequent visitors at the house.

Astrid made herself at home among them, and the

talk moved glibly, as they discussed the new trends in literature.

Each lady was eager to impart something of her own experience, grumbled at the stupidity of editors, praised the work of her sisters in the hope of getting a word of commendation from them, and compliments flew to the heights whereon laurels grow.

Brigitte said little, as she sat near the tea table over which Loni presided in all the freshness of her young maidenhood. From time to time she would cast a glance round, to see that her guests had all they required for their comfort. She would whisper an order occasionally. But matters were going so smoothly that she could follow the conversation without difficulty. She nodded her head in keen approval, and threw in a confirmatory word as occasion required. Then, of a sudden, Astrid began to speak, turning to her hostess, and addressing herself almost exclusively to the latter.

"I'm such a stranger here in Germany, and you'll probably laugh at my ignorance. But I've been interested in the name of Tromholt ever since a book fell into my hands bearing that name as author. Is it a relation? A most entrancing collection of stories. Of course every German will know who the writer was. A woman obviously, though there was only an initial for the Christian name. But I wish you'd tell me more about her."

"I hardly know whom you mean," began Brigitte hesitatingly, and blushing a deep scarlet.

"The main title escapes me, but I recollect that one of the stories was called 'The Return of Don Enriquez.' Ah, you know, I see . . ."

The expression on the ladies' faces was one of surprise and disapproval, as if a rebuff had been administered. Brigitte, however, with downcast eyes, said very softly, almost as though she were confessing a crime:

"The book you refer to is by me . . ."

Up rose the stranger, looking more than ever like the goddess of wisdom, seized Brigitte's hand, and, bowing low, kissed it with every mark of respect.

As if they had been waiting for the signal, all the ladies began a chorus of praise, commending Brigitte's talent, saying what great things she would have done, how much she would have been appreciated, what a pity it was she had never produced another book.

But not one of them referred to the book itself. They had long since forgotten all about it. Besides, she had chosen to remain silent so long, how could she expect to be reckoned among the confraternity of the pen?

When the party broke up, Maxel's little canaille (he himself had not been able to come) said to Brigitte with a sickly smile and a sidelong glance at the Danish woman:

"What sort of a flirtation has Steffen started now, I should like to know!"

Brigitte, who generally suffered such innuendoes silently, this time retaliated:

"There's a good deal of talk just now about your flirtations, Nelly my dear. Of course it's merely talk, for we are all of us cut out of the same cloth!"

The little canaille paled, in spite of her paint, and said almost in a whisper:

"I've wanted to have a talk with you for some time past."

"I shall always be at your service," said Brigitte stiffly, allowing herself to be kissed, and feeling a trifle sorry for her visitor, painful memories notwithstanding.

When, late that night, Steffen came up to bed, he heard Brigitte alternately laughing and crying in her own room.

She was trying to hum her favourite song, *The Waves Are Splashing and Singing*, but she was sobbing too much to get out the notes.

He came in, bewildered, to find her walking up and down in her long nightgown, which made her appear slimmer than she was. Her hands were folded on her breast, and her eyes were ecstatic. He asked uneasily:

"What's the matter, dear?"

"Oh, I was just trying to imagine what I might have become if—but it's all so silly.—Do forgive me my foolishness."

He had a prick of conscience, as he always had when she referred to her abortive literary work.

"What makes you come back to the subject to-day of all days, I should like to know?"

"Ah, your friend has done me so much good."

With tears of bliss streaming down her cheeks, she hid her face in his sympathetic hands.

CHAPTER XXXII

A FEW days later Brigitte received a visit, not from the little canaille, but from Maxel himself.

Her anger at the spiteful trick he had played her husband had cooled down long ago, and she gave him the hearty welcome which so old a friend of the family might claim as his due.

"But why didn't you let us know beforehand? Steffen has just gone out."

"I have not come to see Steffen; I've come to see you."

"Ah, now, don't you make fun of me! What on earth can you want to see me for?"

As she spoke, she became aware how greatly he had changed in recent days. When her friends came to see her after a long absence, she was always amazed at the ruin time had wrought; but Maxel seemed especially lined and scarred. Tall, thin, stooping slightly, he marched up and down the drawing-room. One could hardly say now that he resembled Lassalle. His hooked nose projected like a vulture's beak from between his sunken cheeks; his lower lip hung loose; alone the eyes retained their wonted fires.

She bade him be seated, and then waited for him to begin. But he sat there grinding his teeth, and said never a word.

"Maxel, my dear, do buck up, things can't be as bad as all that," Brigitte protested, trying to comfort him in advance.

"She ran away last night," he blurted out, snappishly.

"Goodness! Why?"

"She could have done it twenty years ago; it wouldn't have been so bad then. But now! It's simply idiotic. If it had not just happened to me, myself, I'd have made a funny story out of it for the paper!"

"But, Maxel, please tell me the reason."

"Reason? You should say 'reasons,' for such actions are always done for many different reasons. It's just as well so; for if there were only one reason, it might turn to tragedy. But there are at least half a dozen she gads about with—and she five-and-forty, if she's a day!"

Brigitte smiled, and mentally added a few years to the figure.

"I don't suppose I need take the affair so greatly to heart . . ."

She had enough worldly wisdom to know that behind this smoke-screen a fire must surely be burning. He went on:

"So lacking in good taste, too! A young coxcomb at Oppenheim's with whom she disappeared after dinner into a darkened room. When it was time to go home, I had to hunt her up. You can't think that's very pleasant for a man."

"Oh, well," began Brigitte ready to spring to the woman's defence.

"When we got home, I tried to make matters as clear to her as is possible for a man in my position—a precious poor one when all's said and done!—and what do you think she said? 'I am an artist, and wish to lead the life of an artist.' It's nearly a quarter of a century since she was last on a platform! To which I replied: 'And I wish you to behave decently.' —'If you don't like the way I behave, you can get on without me,' said she, and flounced out of the room. I can hear the door bang even now. Then she was off. What am I to do?"

There was not a moment's doubt in Brigitte's mind:

"She must be found, and brought back."

"If one only knew where she was to be found! Besides, I don't really want her back. I want to have a little peace."

Brigitte smiled indulgently:

"There, there, you really want her back all the same. When one is not so very far from one's silver wedding one keeps one's wife for ever, whether she is good or bad. You ask Steffen! He doesn't think about having a divorce any longer now!"

"That's all very well as far as Steffen is concerned, for you are an angel," said Maxel passionately. "When a man has the good luck to have *you* . . ."

Brigitte could not help saying quietly to herself: "It's a pity you didn't always think so. You'd have spared me a peck of trouble if you had." But of

course she was careful not to let him guess her thoughts. It would have been a cheap way of getting even with him at a time when he was in serious trouble. Besides, she had a helpful suggestion to make.

"Look here, Maxel, I have an idea she'll be coming along to see me—if for no other reason than to borrow money; we women are always short of cash, at any rate so long as we are living with our husbands . . . Things will arrange themselves, you'll see."

With an uprush of generous emotion, he seized her hand, crying:

"Brigitte, Brigitte, you are a dear!"

Then, with an abrupt transition:

"Did you say Steffen was not at home?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I could have a look at what he's painting? Just to get other thoughts into my head! You'd be conferring a fresh boon, I assure you."

Brigitte mused: "Oh, well, I'll risk a scolding! Here goes!" To Maxel, she said:

"He doesn't like people poking their noses around the studio when he's not there. Still, as it's you . . ."

"Just look at that," cried Maxel, standing in contemplation before the mythological gentry. "He's never said a word to me about this commission—and such a big one too."

"It's a long time since you mentioned any of his work."

"Whose fault, I should like to know? He's shut himself away from me for years now."

"You can't take that amiss, Maxel. You've written some rather unkind things about him, you know."

"What do you mean by 'unkind'? One can't go against one's own judgment, not even for friendship's sake. When the Holy Ghost of objectivity enters into a critic, he forgets all about friendship, and of course now and again he dips his pen in gall. . . . But, I say, what the devil are they, and where are they going?"

Brigitte eagerly explained.

"You don't say so? I can hardly believe it."

Looking on silently, she saw that his brain was busily at work, and knew that his next article had been conceived.

He looked at the panels for a long time before resuming the discussion of his own concerns.

In the end they arranged to inform one another by telephone if either should hear anything of the fugitive, when they would concert the necessary steps.

Two hours later, Loni came to say that Frau Friedenthal had called, and would very much like to have a word with Mistress.

Nelly was ushered in, no longer the little canaille, but posing as a haughty and extremely resolute heroine. Also, she was decked out like a bird of paradise. She had promptly squandered on these splendours all the cash she had saved out of the

housekeeping. Brigitte broached the matter without circumlocution.

"Where did you spend last night?"

"I expect you know as well as I."

Brigitte nodded assent.

"Well, then, I don't need to hide anything from you. I'm a free woman at last. My slavery has come to an end. I return to my destiny."

"What destiny?"

"Don't you know? When I was such an idiot as to forsake my art (for I don't count the wretched drudgery of giving lessons as art), I expected to go back to it after a brief interlude. Well, it's not too late even now. I shall be received with acclamations. They will build triumphal arches for me; and when I tread the boards once more . . ."

"But you can do that just as well from Maxel's house. He won't stand in your way."

"Never again shall I cross that accursed threshold! Never again!"

Growing bolder, Brigitte said:

"The fact is, Maxel has been to see me. He was such a dear. Kept on saying: 'Goodness me, I wonder how on earth she'll manage?' You and I both know how kind-hearted he is."

"Oh, they're all alike in that, these Jews! Only if . . ."

Brigitte interrupted with:

"I really don't think it becomes you to rail against the Jews."

"I don't often. But when he dissects me, his Semitic origin is obvious."

"And he was so anxious about you," went on Brigitte; "even thought of sending your things after you."

Frau Nelly bridled:

"What sort of things?"

The attempt to play the injured innocent was a failure, for her tears began to flow. Not for long, however; she quickly remembered, in alarm, that a woman who is much made up cannot afford the luxury of tears; so, with her pocket handkerchief, she carefully dabbed the edges of her darkened eyelids to remove the devastating traces of emotion.

Then she sat like a Medusa, looking venomously into the distance.

"As regards the young man yesterday evening," continued Brigitte, "I think there is something to be said for Maxel's point of view. In your place I should conduct my love affairs on the quiet. Why should any one else know about such matters?"

"The 'young man' wants to marry me," said Nelly, with the defiant air of a girl just grown up.

"They always talk like that to the mothers when they are paying court. Afterwards, when it comes to the point, they marry the daughters."

At this Nelly's indignation flamed up.

"What are you talking about? Absolute rot! I haven't got a daughter."

"I know that well enough. But you have a hus-

band. He's a dear, kindly and considerate. Do you think my Steffen would have put up with such behaviour from me when I was still as seductively slender as you are?"

"You never were!" Nelly said assertively, emphasising the statement by pretending to have a double chin.

"Maybe you're right. All I could boast of was the famous Rubenesque figure. Oh, well, never mind. Just wait a moment while I put my hat on, and I'll drive back with you to Maxel's."

"I . . . I . . . I . . ."

"I know, I know! Or, rather, I don't! I've quite forgotten what you said about the 'accursed threshold.' One blurts out things like that in the first heat of one's anger, but after a while, when one has cooled down . . ."

"I haven't cooled down in the least."

"Oh, yes, you have. And because of that you will once more be able to get your own way at home."

Within half an hour, everything had been arranged. Maxel had forgiven her; or perhaps it were truer to say that the little canaille had forgiven him. When she was seeing Brigitte to the door, she said with an unusual outburst of fine feeling:

"You have done a lot for me to-day, and I will show my gratitude by giving you a piece of advice: Watch out for that newcomer I met at your place the other day. If you don't, you'll let yourself in for the devil and all."

Brigitte only laughed at her.

"You've got a queer kind of maggot in your head! I know my Steffen."

The little canaille shrugged her shoulders, as if to say, "You're absolutely hopeless. So stupid that no one can help you."

A few days later, in the great newspaper to which Maxel owed his influence, there appeared over his signature an article with the intriguing caption "Give Them Walls."

The writer expressed the opinion that the chaotic state of modern pictorial art was due to the fact that our painters were no longer given great decorative tasks to perform. Otherwise, art would necessarily have gone farther along the path which of old, to its great advantage, had been assigned to it by the spiritual and temporal princes. Convincing support was given to this thesis by a historical retrospect. First came a mention of Giotto's Assisi frescoes and Raphael's cartoons; then an enumeration of the most famous decorative pieces belonging to subsequent days, passing by way of Correggio's dome frescoes and the mural ornamentation of the doge's palace down to the Ste. Geneviève pictures in the Panthéon and Kaulbach's pictorial philosophy of history. But, in the present day, artists were given fewer and ever fewer opportunities of the kind, with the result that an orgy of sansculottism had broken loose. Only here and there were artists who still furnished a job

which might engross the energies of a genius. Erler's pictures in the Kursaal at Wiesbaden were mentioned, also Kampf's and a few other frescoes, to show that even to-day the creative imagination could be given problems requiring a supreme formative capacity for their solution.

To conclude, almost it seemed as an afterthought, a few lines were devoted to the great cycle which was nearing completion under the brush of Steffen Tromholt.

Not a word of praise was vouchsafed, and the writer deliberately refrained from mentioning the place for which the panels were destined. The mere name of the manor house which, until a few years ago, had belonged to the much envied artist, would have been enough to arouse fresh animus against him.

For various reasons, this article attracted wide-spread attention; and, of a sudden, Steffen found himself once more in the first rank of creative artists.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Brigitte left for Nauheim to take her course of treatment for the heart. She had missed three years, funds having been so short. At last the Tromholts could afford it again.

She leaned out of the window, laughing joyously down at Steffen, her whole person exhaling happy anticipation; and, as the train was drawing out, she cried once more: "Don't forget to give my love to Astrid when you see her."

Nor was it long before he saw his friend. That very evening he looked her up.

She had taken two rooms at the Adlon, a sitting-room and a bedroom; he could, therefore, see her in comfort and privacy.

He had been to call on her twice, without mentioning the fact to Brigitte, for in spite of his wife's complaisance in the matter of his love affairs, he had made it a rule to keep a silent tongue in his head so that he might be supposed to have said farewell to Eros for ever.

It was, indeed, a good while since he had been really in love. Ephemeral amours came and went; his models lent facility from time to time—for he had long since abandoned his determination to avoid intimacy with them—and this had kept him from sexual starvation.

None the less, throughout the empty years, he had been hungering for the possession of a woman, possession in the higher sense of the term. As far as the body was concerned, there was no lack of women's bodies! Daily, the most beautiful of these were ready to display their charms to him, and to let him have his will of them. But what he longed for was a reciprocal intimacy with a woman whose mind was attuned to his no less than her body; he craved for a great passion, and had never encountered a fit object.

Thus were matters with him when Astrid once more entered his life. He had never quite forgotten her, but she had become a dream-wish which had taken wings unto itself and had flown to so high a heaven that no mortal man could follow.

Then the dream had come to earth again and stood before him in bodily shape, thrown across his path by the indifferent hand of fate; and it seemed as if he need merely stretch forth his arms to clasp the reality to his heart.

Yes, there she was in all the triumph of her youth; and he had now become so modest in his claims that he hardly had the will any longer to strive for so great a happiness.

True, an unconscious self-confidence urged him forward to seek her out; there was even something of the conqueror aroused in him at sight of her reliance on him and her need for his guidance and advice.

Aided by him, she had found a studio, and had sent to Denmark for furniture, books, pictures, and so forth, to be dispatched from her old home. He had to promise not to come knocking at her studio door until she sent him a formal invitation. Weeks had passed by, yet still she repeated the one word: Patience.

When he reached the Adlon, towards seven that evening, he found her downstairs in the hall, ready to go out.

"I feel like going to the theatre to-night," she said, "for not even the most engrossing of books can tide one comfortably over an evening passed in a hotel room. I dare not hope that you are free, otherwise I'd ask you to come with me."

He told her the extent of his freedom; whereon a smile of contentment suffused her face, one might almost describe it as a possessive smile, and she forthwith changed her plans.

"One can go to a theatre any night of the week. If you agree, I would suggest we have a good talk instead."

He swallowed a cry of joy, hoping to conceal his elation.

"Let's find some place where we can sit quietly without these awful hotel electric chandeliers glaring down on us, and a lot of wealthy snobs eyeing us in passing."

He knew of a little restaurant, where there were softly lighted cubicles and pleasant nooks for a tête-à-

tête, a place celebrated throughout Berlin for the excellence of its cooking, and the goodness of its cellar.

Thither he took her, and when the table had been cleared and the good old Burgundian had made them mellow, he felt the hour had come for mutual confidences, and wondered if she would at last meet his advances half-way.

Their minds went back to those days in Paris before the war.

"You may not be any more beautiful than you were then, but you are much more of a personality," he said. "I have a feeling when I am with you that you are unique, that there is not another human being on earth like you. And that somewhat strident virginity . . ."

She winced; but he went on, reassuringly:

"I know how matters stood, but used the word advisedly, and you must acquit me of impertinence. All I meant to convey was that your rather aggressive maidenhood had changed during these years into a gift-bestowing womanhood—and lucky the man on whom such gifts are bestowed!"

"They are not for bestowal! They've been bestowed once and for all."

The conviction shot through his head: "Then she did marry that man." Aloud he said:

"And did it bring you so much unhappiness?"

"It has beggared me for life."

"Let's look at the matter calmly," he said with an attempt at levity. "There's probably a residue

that will suffice to make another man deem himself wealthy."

"What other man?"

"How can I tell? Maybe you yourself do not know at this moment. All I am sure of is that one day I shall be following you with burning eyes, consumed by envy—just as before, in Paris."

Taken aback, it would appear, and yet gently pleased, she raised her eyes to his, asking:

"Was I really so much to you then?"

"How can you ask! We had spent several weeks together, seeing one another every day—then, all of a sudden, you slammed your door in my face."

"I've already told you how sorry I was in the sequel. Besides, it wasn't altogether my fault. I went to the country with some one I had not seen for a long time, and my maid had strict orders to let no one know where I had gone. I had not wanted her to treat you like the others, and turn you down so brusquely."

"That's all very well! But you'd far better own up that you've hardly given me a thought from that time to when we met again the other day, or shortly before, anyhow."

She reflected for a while, then said:

"It may be—I've been so worried all the time."

"And are worried even now."

"How do you know that?" There was a note of alarm in the question.

"One does not need to be a person of great dis-

cernment to be aware of it. One has only to glance at you to realise that you are still not quite of this world. You merely looked me up recently because you were at a loose end."

She gazed silently into her wineglass.

Slowly advancing his hand over the table, he gently caressed her little finger with his.

She pulled her hand abruptly away, and shuddered as she said:

"You are trying to wrench my secret from me. What right have you to endeavour to penetrate my privacy?"

"We men have no rights that you yourselves do not grant us. But as you are aware, I am groping round your soul and am trying to discover a secret door by which I may enter in. Unless you point out that door to me, I shall never find my way."

"What do you want of me?" Her eyes flashed as she spoke.

"Is it not, rather, what do you want of *me?* I mean, what has brought you to Berlin and made you put yourself under my guidance? Since you refuse to tell me, I shall have to tell you: You thought I was a pleasant companion, one who made no claims on you, a man you could whistle down the wind when it pleased your whim. You said to yourself: 'I don't want a lover; but this man is no longer dangerous, and besides he is too old for me. He is a master of his art, and that is sufficient excuse to seek him out when my soul craves for some one who

speaks the same language as myself and who will understand my thoughts.' Am I right?"

Again she reflected before answering. At last she said:

"It is always difficult to probe one's own motives, and to look truth in the face. One is apt to keep one's veils on even when alone. You are wrong in supposing that I made your art a pretext for looking you up. I have too much respect for you—and for myself—to put your art on the low level such a surmise would imply. But you are right in certain of your assumptions; above all in— No, there are some things one can't talk about, the tongue refuses to speak. You can know this much at least: for several years now I have been wandering hither and thither. A society vagabond. I did big-game hunting in India, I joined an expedition in Upper Egypt; and no end of other strange things have I done. Ah, how lovely it is to sleep in the warm desert with the stars shining overhead as large as street lamps, and no sound save the rhythmic chewing of the camels kneeling round your tents in a circle. But if one is in thrall to a yearning, and the yearning is poisoned, nothing of that sort can bring solace. I have enough money to give myself all these joys, more money than I ever had in my life before. You Germans made yourselves responsible for that, when you allowed Denmark to become wealthy during the war. But what can I do with it all? Then I said to myself: You weren't such a bad student. Ryssel-

berghe even went so far as to say you were his best pupil. Why not begin again?—And here I am, and out there is the merry month of May, and all is as it was before!"

"I am afraid it will remain so, unless you can make up your mind to take some one into your confidence, and pour out your heart."

"I know of only one person I could do that to," she whispered, gazing into the void.

"And that is?"

"Your wife."

He felt a little discouraged, for he had hoped she would have spoken his name. Then he recalled the things he had not told Brigitte. Finally, uprooting selfishness, he replied:

"You are right. My wife would be the best confidante. But since she is away, won't you accept me as a substitute?"

She looked at him searchingly; then she said:

"Agreed, so long as you don't establish claims in consequence. I've already told you, there are things one cannot talk about. You'll have to feel that. Anyway, I can't break through my reserves here—nor in that hotel room of mine.

"Won't my place do?"

"No, no! That least of all. If you wait a day or two my own little nest will be ready. I'll push on with it. Meanwhile, I should prefer we did not meet. When I get settled in my new home, I shall be able to talk more freely. You'll see!"

He was more than satisfied at the prospect, and, soon after, they betook themselves home.

The May night was fragrant with the scent of flowers, and she allowed him to slip his hand through her arm. He trembled with a hopeful expectation, which he would have deemed himself presumptuous to define.

Nothing more did he hear of her for six days. He slept little; and but for the pressing nature of the work he had in hand, he would have completely neglected his studio.

At last a message arrived: "To-morrow at five—with a bouquet, please, for it is my house-warming. Astrid."

Nothing the florist had to show him was good enough to his taste. At last his eye was attracted by a beautiful plant in a pot, but when he enquired the price, he found it was beyond his present means. He who had for so long been spendthrift was mortified at having to be economical on an occasion like the present one!

As he was climbing the four flights to her studio, he kept on asking himself who would open the door to him. Would it be she? Or would it be Vibeke, that worthy compatriot of hers who had been seeing after her at the Adlon? If she had a witness on the premises—even though that witness could not understand a word of German—the whole visit would be conventionalised.

Oh, joy! She herself was standing at the door,

in her overall, with her hair caught in a loose knot at the nape of her neck.

"I've had to work like a nigger," she said, drawing the housemaid's glove from her right hand so as to shake his cordially in welcome. "It seemed as if I should never be able to get the studio ready for the reception of so illustrious a visitor!"

There was plenty to admire, nevertheless.

She had divided the big room—taking his as model—into a larger portion, filled with painting gear of all sorts, bare of ornament, but for a rug or two, and suitable for an efficient workshop; and a smaller, partitioned off, cosy and habitable, and eminently pleasing to an artist's eye. There were high-backed chairs, against terra cotta walls, which were sprinkled with tiny flecks of gold; Persian rugs on floor and divan, scattered with seeming carelessness, to convey the impression of a confusion of cushions and coverings. A carved settee, stiff and severe, was so covered with bright draperies that only here and there a glimpse of its austerity peeped out. On a low chest of drawers, resembling an altar, the tea-urn steamed like a burnt offering, the blue flame of the spirit-lamp forming the central point.

While he was voicing his appreciation, she took the nosegay from his hand, saying:

"Flowers were still lacking. Yours shall be the only ones."

From a dark corner she fetched a tall vase which looked like the transparent stalk of a lily. It was

already filled with water, and now the blossoms swayed fantastically over the lip, as if they had grown out of their present habitat.

"Where may I sit down?"

"Anywhere you like—on the floor for all I care," she said gayly.

He flung himself down, with a laugh, and looked up at her as if she were in heaven.

"I'll put your cup on the floor by your side, then you won't have to move."

"That can't be," he said, pointing to the other part of the studio which seemed to be guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. "First of all I must see what you are working at."

"You are quite right. However much we may as human beings enjoy the society of our fellow mortals, we are only privileged to do so in accordance with our abilities as artists."

She handed him his cup, and herself took a seat on the divan so that her feet almost touched his shoulder as he lay on the floor.

"An old man is now lying at your feet like a young lovesick swain. Not very seemly, I fear!"

"It's strange, but I had the same feeling. That we should never be able to give ourselves up wholly to the passing moment! No matter whether what troubles us be a question of morals or a question of taste, one or the other sends a spy into the house to peer over our shoulders."

Thereupon, he sprang up, saying:

"'What is not becoming to you, that you must avoid,' as old Goethe says. Besides it is not appropriate, after all, to our rôles as master and disciple! Please, show me some of your work."

Without a word, she led him to the studio part of the room, whose simplicity pleased him greatly.

He passed from one canvas to the other, and she read every hint of approbation or of condemnation that crossed his face.

"Rysselberghe's influence comes out here and there; but there's a good deal of yourself, too, and I heartily compliment you on that score. Also I may congratulate you for having avoided the extravagances of the moderns, otherwise we should have had little in common."

"You see," she answered, "I had a premonition. It was a feeling such as one has when sitting by a lamp in the open, half-dead insects struggling in the circle of light. The recent revolution in painting had claimed so many victims already, I did not want to join the holocaust."

"And you'll be spared no end of a struggle in consequence—even if one has to start by scolding you." Then, pointing to a couple of pictures leaning with their faces to the wall, he asked: "What have you there?"

She bit her lip, saying:

"Nothing! Nothing worth showing."

He understood at once.

"And where is the looking-glass that is the neces-

sary prerequisite?" His question was put laughingly, for indeed no mirror could be seen.

Instead of answering, she drooped her head to one side, while he asked himself:

"What can have happened to the young woman whom I once saw in shameless nakedness astride a wooden horse?"

As if carved with a knife, lines of bitterness were graven in the angle of her fresh young mouth. Since she did not answer, he said:

"You've acquired a way of smiling that no mortal man will envy you for, I assure you!"

She made a sudden movement, and said resolutely: "Come, let us go back to the cosy end of the room—I'll tell you my story."

They lighted cigarettes, and, while he sat in the high-backed armchair, she took up her station at one end of the divan. Then she said:

"When I was nineteen, I ran away from home. My brothers were furious, but my guardian kept me in funds. I was a queer compound of craving for beauty and defiance of the world from which I had sprung. The Academy of Art, therefore, was far from contenting me, and Germany almost equally so. After two years I found myself in the Paris Bohême where middle-class morality is of no account, its prescriptions being merely graded according to their varying levels of foolishness. Yet I was sufficiently astute to realise that here, too, a kind of moral canon existed, ludicrous though its form might be; and

that any infringement of the code was just as severely punished as elsewhere. This astuteness, and a certain mother wit—'natural selection' one might almost say—saved me from losing myself. But I felt that whatever I had of youth and beauty that could be placed at the service of art must be given without stint. 'Hellenism' was what we called the phantom we pursued, and we never troubled to remember that we were the products of another epoch and other latitudes, which made those antique ways of living and thinking an absurdity for children of a later age. So when one of my good comrades said: 'Tiens, Astride, I fancy you'd make a splendid model. Do give me a sitting'—I complied with his wish, partly to do him a service and partly out of bravado—for I knew that such a thing would be looked upon with horror by my worthy relatives at home. That one sitting gave rise to many others, and I was never made to regret my good nature, for they always showed the greatest respect for me. Should any one of them have ventured to take liberties, he would have been made to rue the day. Besides, they knew that I only gave a sitting when some one was really at his wit's end for a suitable model, for a subject that none of the available professionals was capable of personifying. But where I certainly went off the straight (probably from vanity, and because it made a lot of talk) was when I admitted spectators to the show—as I did you on one occasion. That's what had happened a year earlier in the case of the man who be-

came my fate. Of course he was of the craft, too, or I should never have done it. He turned up one night at our table, much as you turned up in the estaminet. Very different from all the others in his looks and his ways. Had that indefinable silent self-possession which gives well-bred Englishmen so much power. When the others were making a racket, he sat perfectly quiet, letting his great, gentle eyes roam here and there. Gentle, he was, so gentle! But in the end he had me by the scruff! We were walking together on a May night, just as you and I were a week ago. It was two o'clock in the morning, and everything was shut. 'May I come up with you?' he asked. 'Why not?' I answered. One or more of them would often sit in my rooms till morning, and nothing had ever happened. But he, that night, took possession of me before I really knew what we were about. 'Twas just like a leaf falling from a tree. I can't say I ever regretted it. Of course it was inevitable that I should give myself to some one soon or late. After a while I learned that he was quite as well off as I was, and, what's more, of good family. That was nothing to me, since I did not want to get anything out of him. If he brought me a costly present, I would throw it on the floor with a laugh, so he gave that up. I should have laughed just as much if he had said anything about marriage. I spent a few days with him on his yacht, but only once, for I didn't like the way in which the crew looked at me. He wouldn't take me to England,

but in Paris we grew more and more united, until he became the whole world for me. He let me believe that I was the whole world for him. Then the war broke out. You know the intoxication of those early days. It was the same everywhere. War weddings were the fashion. Even couples who had never intended to come together for more than a day or two found themselves, of a sudden, tied together for life. That was why it seemed quite natural to me that before he joined up he should take me to the British Consulate and make me his wife. This formality apart, everything was to go on as of old; he would not take me home and introduce me to his people until the war was over. England was still closed to me. But while he was at the front I was racked with anxiety, and almost went out of my mind. One day he wrote to me from his home telling me he had been wounded. Thereupon I broke my promise, and crossed the Channel. I didn't actually go to his place, for I merely wanted to breathe the air he was breathing. I wrote to tell him where I was (how could I help doing so?) and he answered by forbidding me to come near him. But I circled round him in a narrowing orbit. He had gone to Brighton, in order to get up his strength before returning to the trenches. Almost out of my wits in my distress, I drove over there one day and waited on the sea-front. He came along after a time, limping, and leaning on an old lady's arm. I knew her face well enough from photographs, and I often saw her in

my dreams, though he never mentioned her now in his letters. Then came the terrible thing, which shattered the world for me and has blackened my whole future. Drawing nearer and nearer, he caught sight of me at length, stopped short, and asked the lady with him to turn back. He turned, and went out of my life. That very day, I wrote begging for a divorce, and within an hour came his answer. He agreed. The rest was a matter of arrangement. Of course he had to give grounds for divorcing me, and he adduced the impropriety of my life as a model, which could be taken as sufficient evidence. This seemed an outrage to me, and I have never been able to get over it. That was why I went back to my maiden name, though I find it more convenient to call myself 'Fru.' There you have the hackneyed story of a girl who set out to storm the heavens, and ended by crying her eyes out like any working-class woman whose husband has forsaken her."

Steffen and Astrid were silent for a while. He was deeply moved, and yet a trifle disappointed as well, for he had expected her adventure to be more out of the common.

Then something happened which he could never have foreseen.

Astrid Helsted jumped up, and, her eyes flashing and wild, stood close in front of him, so that her knees touched his. Grasping his shoulders, she exclaimed:

"Do you know that you are the only person to whom I have ever told this? Will you despise me? Or will you help me to bear my shame? Even now, the thought of it threatens my sanity. I want to put a bullet through his head; the idea of killing him has become an obsession. Yet at the same time I lie awake at night weeping for him to come back to me. I have grown so timid, and so petty. When I came to your door, when I had rung the bell and had sent in my card, my heart was beating furiously, and I was on the point of taking to my heels because I fancied you would have told your wife about my sitting for the Amazon picture, and that she would say she was not at home. When that pretty girl came back to tell me that the mistress would be happy to see me, I could have flung my arms round her neck. I could have hugged your wife, too! Not like a daughter, though I suppose I might have been her daughter. I wanted to put my arms round the human being, to clasp the quiet, frank humanity in her. I should like to kneel before her; and, instead, I'm going to play the traitor to her! . . . Why are you staring at me like that? Why are you staring at me? You want me, and I must give myself to you. Not because I love you. I love that other man, and always shall! You will have to make the best of the fact that I am yearning for him when your arms are round me."

He drew her down to him between his knees, and

her hands slipped from his shoulders, clasping him in an embrace.

She was weeping, and went on weeping for some time.

He kissed her throat, her cheeks, every part of her head that he could reach. Between whiles, he spoke in low tones, uttering words of gratitude and comfort.

"I know that I am not the right man for you, that I should never have shown you my love. I am too old, and too weary. You ought to have found some one who could snatch you into the whirlpool of a young passion, whereas I can only give you the vestiges that remain after a life full of confusion and distress. But that other man is not here, so you will have to make the best of me; even if it is only for six months or so, until the right man comes. Perhaps our intimacy ought not to last longer! You must preserve inner freedom for the great experience which is essential if you are ever to lay the ghost that haunts you. I shall not aspire to be more than a stop-gap, keeping the place open for him; and when you leave me for his sake, I shall not be jealous as I used to be. I shall know that I have had all you and life can still give me, and I shall be thankful to you as long as I live."

Holding her head between his hands, he bent it back to kiss her on the mouth.

Misunderstanding, she cried amid her tears:

"Don't thrust me away from you, even for a

moment. I want to be yours, that I may rid myself of those thoughts, that I may rid myself of myself. I am sick of myself, I suffer so horribly from myself, and you must help me to escape!"

She kissed him with a kiss in which her lips encircled his . . .

Midnight was striking when Steffen Tromholt reached home.

After the hours of passion, they had sought the little restaurant where they had drawn nearer together a few days before. Saying little at first, they had supped peacefully, and afterwards, over their cigarettes, they had made plans for the coming time.

Now he was alone in his bedroom, and did not know what to make of all this happiness.

It had become so much a matter of course with him to share with Brigitte everything great and beautiful that came into his life, that he found his present loneliness strange and oppressive.

He would have liked to sit down and write to his wife, telling her all about it. But that was impossible. Really he ought to congratulate himself that she was away, for otherwise, one look at his face would have told her everything.

Well, he would have to get on without her this time.

He went into her room, sat on the edge of the empty bed, and, fondling the pillow on which her

head was wont to rest, he let his thoughts play with memories of the evening. While thus engaged, he murmured again and again (it seemed crazy to him!):

"Dear Brigitte! Dear, dear Brigitte!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

Yet as Steffen Tromholt became accustomed to daily association with his new-found friend, and was increasingly preoccupied with her in thought and deed, he grew more and more uneasy at the prospect of Brigitte's return.

She had taken so passionate an interest in all that concerned him, had done this for many, many, many years; it was impossible that she should not very soon pierce the mystery of his frequent absences. Every meeting of the committee of the Artists' Society was known to her—did she not herself write the convocations?—and any other claims on his time were so insignificant that they would not serve as excuse.

Save for rare professional soirées he had long since given up going out in the evening. He avoided all society functions, and theatres and concerts no longer catered for his leisure hours.

Without knowing how it had come about, he now shunned anything which was likely to bring him in contact with the outer world.

Things might have gone on like this till death claimed him.

And now, this revolution in his daily habits!

Through his unexpected happiness he came to realise that he was far from being old enough to renounce the joys life had still to offer him, that there

were good things in plenty for those who could appreciate them and gather them, and that he had been suffering a spiritual famine without being aware.

And yet, if the truth were told, he had been aware, had always known that one side of his nature was being starved. Hence the bitterness which permeated his whole being, hence his detestation of the marriage bond—in theory, at least!

What was going to happen now?

Take the bull by the horns, and tell her everything? She was unarmed. At most she would retaliate with that woeful little smile of hers, the one he knew so well, for he saw it twist her mouth whenever he had behaved like a brute or had merely been irritable with her.

True, that smile was enough to disarm him, for behind it he read of powers which she had sacrificed on his account, had deliberately crushed and suppressed. Often when he saw it he had an impulse to kneel down before her, just as Astrid had said she wished to, and bury his face in her lap, beseeching her to forgive him. But one must not be theatrical, and thus make them both ridiculous; enough to caress her kindly, or not make any sign at all, just as the fancy took him.

Would he have to build up an elaborate structure of lies? What kind of lies? She saw every pebble in his path, knew beforehand every possibility that lay ahead of him. No means of evading her penetration! One would have to build on her innocent

credulity; she often allowed herself to be taken in by absurdly incongruous subterfuges. Sometimes, for a lark, he would invent the most flagrant of impostures, and she would walk straight into the trap.

This was the one remaining hope, if he were not to turn his back on his new happiness—and that would be sheer poltroonery!

Day by day that happiness grew. Inconceivable were the heights to which it seemed to be carrying him. He walked upon air. He sped forward through the springtide like any callow youth who for the first time finds his heart in tune with the song of the birds and the frenzy of the blossoming time.

For nearly a week he did not a stroke of work. He merely roamed about the studio, for hours and hours on end, whistling, sucking his pipe, thinking thoughts unutterable in their sublimity.

Or he would stand contemplating himself in the mirror. There was no question about it, he was looking younger. His grey locks had an upstanding, vigorous curl, masking his inclination to baldness. His eyes were brighter, clearer, more cheerful; the wrinkles in cheeks and neck were vanishing, the skin was regaining its elasticity.

"How pleased she'll be at my appearance! She'll notice it directly she gets out of the train." Often he pictured to himself Brigitte's agreeable surprise—and yet it was for Astrid that he needed to be rejuvenated!

When he had had enough of gazing at his reflec-

tion, he would resume his aimless rambling about the room, singing and smoking in truculent and slothful beatitude.

Gradually the hour when he might go to his beloved would come round. He did not care to lunch with her, for he would not have his liaison become a matter of common knowledge. Besides, he felt ashamed of not being in a position to take her to the smart restaurants she was accustomed to. He had to calculate his expenditure very carefully in order to meet the costs of an evening's entertainment. Even then he would often thrust ten times the amount in his pocket, lest he should have reckoned on too low a scale. She, on the contrary, took affluence as a matter of course, so that it never entered her head to deny herself anything she had set her heart on, no matter how costly her whim might be.

There was one advantage to be reaped from this kind of life. Whenever they found themselves in places patronised by good society and he caught sight of a face or figure that appealed to his artist's eye, he would out with pencil and sketch-book and fix it on paper. In this way he accumulated a regular menagerie of human types, which would be well worth the marketing at some future date.

Theatres provided other booty, not to mention the streets and trams.

His only regret was that he could not take his chalks along with him—but this would have made him too conspicuous. He had to rest content with

indicating the colour scheme in words, trusting to his memory for the remaining details.

Next morning he would get to work on a more finished picture of what he had roughed in overnight, while the image was still freshly engraved on his mind.

Hardly realising how it came about, he found sketch after sketch and picture after picture accumulating around him.

"I shan't stand empty-handed before Brigitte when she comes home," he thought; and he worked so assiduously in the end that even his meetings with Astrid began to suffer.

"Just as well," he mused, "we shall not get too accustomed to one another!"

Astrid took pleasure in all these activities of his, without in the least realising what they held of possibilities for the future. She laughed heedlessly, demanding that he put more satire into his work, little realising that his plain method of portrayal had a higher satirical content than any downright caricature. He never spoke of what he intended doing with all this material, and she never thought of asking.

Day by day Brigitte's letters came to hand, and day by day he answered them. He could never have brought himself to neglect this routine, he knew how she longed for the postman's coming. She wrote sparingly about her own improvement, and placed all her trust in the after-effects of the cure. She

complained about having to comply with so many social formalities, of having to change for dinner in the evening; it all made her so tired, so very tired.

That was her constant refrain: "Tired, tired, tired!"

He was often depressed at the lingering nature of her malady, and at the trouble and anxiety it imposed on him.

But as the day for her return approached, he became more and more happy, and eagerly looked forward to having her home again.

The train drew up, and he scrutinised the drab crowd that scrambled out of the compartments.

Ah, there she was; and the first glimpse told him there was no improvement. Always hitherto she had arrived rosy and fresh in spite of the long and fatiguing journey.

"Dear Steffen!"

Her greeting, too, had not the usual joyous ring.

Nor when they sat together in the taxi—the day was so warm that he had had the hood let down so that the mild air could play around her—did she chatter in the old cheerful way; she had such a lot to tell him as a rule after these absences of hers. But to-day she sat silently holding his hand, while he said to himself:

"Ah, how fondly do I love her, old though she be!"

When the maids had been given a word of praise and the flowers had been enjoyed and caressed,

Brigitte stood quite still, and looked at him, a challenge in her eyes.

He knew well what that expression meant. She never even took the time to wash off the dust of the journey.

"Nothing so very wonderful to see this time," he said; but she saw that he had a surprise in store.

Happy anticipation seemed to lend her wings, so that as she went up the winding stair into the studio one could almost hoax oneself into the belief that she was well again.

Canvas after canvas, cartoon after cartoon, had been arranged in a wide circle. He had made the best possible display of his material.

Hardly knowing what to say in her astonishment, she gazed alternately at him and at his work. At last she found her voice, exclaiming:

"My dear, my dear, what is all this? I had hoped to find your *Venus and Adonis* finished, or at most . . . And here I am faced with another, a much younger Steffen; a critic of society, or what shall I call him? . . . You never wrote a word about it in your letters, you old rascal, you!"

Her wonted jubilation had returned; he packed his cares away.

At supper she began once more to speak about the array of pictures.

"How did you happen upon such treasures? A year's study and observation would hardly be considered a long time to achieve all you have achieved,

and you've compressed it into a few weeks. How have you done it? Tell me."

Instead of answering, he drew his sketch-book out of his pocket, and handed it to her across the table.

She turned over the pages, one by one, studying each carefully.

"I am slowly beginning to understand," she said after a while. "You've been gadding about with Astrid, and this is the harvest. I wonder if there is another man in the whole world who knows as much as you."

"So that's Brigitte's jealousy!" Steffen said to himself. "The jealousy I've been shaking in my shoes about!"

In truth, she was not entirely without jealousy, but her jealousy wore another visage than that of ordinary women.

When she was comfortably ensconced in the white peace of her bed, and he came in to say good night, she held his hand between both hers and would not let it go.

"It does seem rather a shame!" Brigitte said quietly as if talking to herself.

"What seems a shame?"

"That you should begin to work in a new style, and that every one else will be able to watch it developing, that Astrid will watch it developing, while I must take my departure so soon."

Something gripped him by the throat. He recalled his impression when he had first seen her at

the station, and he remembered that these first impressions are apt to embody the truth.

"You must not take your departure soon," he said trying to cheer her, unaware that his finger-nails were cutting into the palm of her hand. "You have had this trouble for years, and you have become stronger rather than weaker. It may last just as many more."

"Not many," she said imploringly, as if the decision rested with him. "Only one. One little year. Then you will be free."

"Brigitte!"

She smiled, with a gentle, enigmatic smile, which seemed to belong to another world; and went on stroking his hand, until he insisted that it was time for her to go to sleep.

Obediently, she turned half round, arranged the numerous pillows she needed (for she had to sleep almost sitting up now, or she could not breathe), and settled down for the night.

If Steffen had fancied that she would put any difficulties in the way of his meeting Astrid, he had been utterly mistaken. When she thought that he had not been to see his friend for some time—and he did not always tell her when he went—she would say to him:

"You must not neglect Astrid!"

Or perhaps it would be:

"Your friend will think that I am keeping you away!"

Such remarks were frequent.

He had looked forward with intense anxiety to Astrid's first visit, but he might have spared himself his pains.

When, one day, Loni came to tell him that the "foreign lady" was below, he went down to find the two women laughing together just as cheerfully as on that first occasion when he had not guessed who was in the room.

He really did not know which of the two set this merry tone, so little suited to the hidden tragedy of the situation. But it must be Brigitte, for she always put tragedy airs to flight, even though she herself . . .

He had better thrust these gloomy thoughts away, and be content to take things as they were!

The two were sitting hand in hand, and each of them stretched out a free hand towards him, so that he merely needed to clasp them and the circle was complete.

For the rest, they hardly seemed to need him; they had such a lot to tell one another.

"You'd better clear out. We've no use for you!"

Yet when he started to take them at their word, they both held him back, saying that it would not be so nice if he were gone, and he'd better stay after all.

How strange it was. He had a sense of happiness which touched higher levels than anything he had experienced before.

It was blessing, it was fulfilment.

Fulfilment at last. All that he had been craving for his whole life long had suddenly dropped into his hands as a gift from the gods.

His future course lay open before him.

No confession, no absolution, no sullen forbearance! On the other hand, there was no loud-mouthed insistence upon freedom and "artists' morality," no flaunting of a triangle at which a spiteful world could look askance. Consideration on one side, privacy on the other, and sweet harmony between spirits which were high-minded and noble enough to transmute into gold that which for the multitude is dross.

CHAPTER XXXV

STEFFEN's love paradise was not altogether untroubled.

Astrid was still too greatly harassed by the remembrance of her marriage fiasco; she suffered torments owing to the persistent thought of the insult she had sustained; and because of this she could not give herself wholly to the new relationship without at least an occasional revulsion of feeling.

Strange things happened during the hours they were alone together. In the full tide of passionate surrender, she would suddenly thrust him from her with horror; or, she might be covering him with kisses and overwhelming him with endearments, while all the time murmuring the name of her first lover. On other occasions she would lament aloud the impossibility of ever wiping the image of that man from her heart, would expatiate upon her longing to see him again.

A younger and less experienced lover than Steffen would have felt aggrieved, would have looked upon her repining as an outrage, would have fancied himself demeaned by allowing the relationship to continue. Steffen, however, knew his part well; he realised what fate expected of him, and upon what foundation his newly-won happiness was built. He

foresaw that, treated tactfully, these manifestations of distress would gradually cease, and that until the propitious day arrived he would have to play the rôle of friend and helper—one might almost say of physician—to the much-loved woman at his side.

He not only bore with Astrid's whimsies, but even gave her to believe that he sympathised with all the meanderings of her fancy, and he took counsel with her as to how a future meeting with her sometime husband might be contrived.

Little by little he was able to allay the fever which consumed her, and to win her to a calmer outlook on life's possibilities.

But he was not successful in extracting the poisoned dart from her soul, in conjuring away the smart her dignity had sustained. Pride was of the very essence of her nature, and this pride had been too grievously mortified to be of any use to her now in the reconstruction of her existence. Always and always the wound gaped anew, thus disturbing her inner harmony.

To see her coming, tall and straight, with a cool radiance flooding her austere and sun-tanned face, with her imperious mouth, and the delicately arched cheeks, the rounded chin and its central dimple combining to soften the rather severe impression her countenance was apt to produce—to see her coming with her swinging gait and her eager, probing eyes, one could never have dreamed that a spiritual storm was raging behind this self-assured exterior, nor

would one have guessed that she was advancing, guideless, along her freely chosen path as if walking on the edge of a precipice down which she might at any moment fall headlong.

Not really guideless, now that she had chosen Steffen as guide—and yet she was still in revolt against self-surrender. His influence over her was steadily increasing; but, for that very reason, she was inclined at times to treat him as an enemy.

What one might call her caprices were legion.

At one time she would reproach him as a poltroon because he jibbed at flaunting their intimacy in the public eye; at another she would demand the greatest secrecy, shunning even places where there was no likelihood of their meeting acquaintances.

Or she would spend her money with a lavish hand and expect him to do the same, reproaching herself in the sequel with encompassing his ruin.

Again, at times when he gave the agreed knock, she would open the door to him in dishabille; but on other occasions she would be furious if she caught him scrutinising her with an artist's appreciation.

In one matter, however, she suffered no change of mood: she would never pose for him. She could not again face the risk of another affront like the one which had wrecked her happiness before, could not renew a situation which had exposed her to so outrageous a charge. One such experience was more than sufficient to last her a lifetime.

And yet her body was so exquisitely moulded.

Rarely had mortal man the chance of contemplating so much perfection. The delicate asperity of the girl's shape he had glimpsed in those Paris days had blossomed into the full maturity of young womanhood. The lines of her figure had rounded, till the rippling play of light and shade in the muscles gave it an unearthly beauty rivalled only by some of the statues belonging to the most splendid period of classical sculpture.

He could recollect only one picture in modern times wherein a similar body had been portrayed. It was probably to be found in some German gallery or the other. But which one, out of the many? All he remembered clearly was that he had stood long in front of it—many years ago now!—and had been conscious of one wish, one wish alone: "If only you could have the good fortune to get such a model to pose for you; just once!"

Now he had the chance; he had such a lovely creature before his very eyes; but he was only allowed to contemplate her as man, not as artist.

Nor could he give himself the joy of delineating her form from memory. She had made him solemnly promise not to try, saying:

"If your wife only so much as catches a glimpse of such a study, she'll know at once who has sat for it."

Astrid's contention was far too well founded in fact for him to try to override her. Yet whenever, pencil and paper in hand, he idly let his fancy roam, the figures he drew were attempts at portraying hers.

No matter how utterly unsimilar the build of a model might be, he found himself constantly tending to depict Astrid's contours in the panels he was now finishing. Since this self-denial was becoming a torment to him, he put the commission work aside for the time being, and devoted himself to the elaboration of the sketches he had made of society types. These were clamouring for completion.

He had been particularly successful with the study of a group in a box at the Opera. The warm orange tints of the decorations made a glowing background for the man's black evening suit, which in its turn set off the strident rose-red gown of the lady who formed the central point of the picture, and whose bare breast, arms, and shoulders were the objects around which the whole had been built up. It was long since he had done anything so powerfully suggestive as he attained in this colour scheme, and Brigitte was inordinately pleased with his achievement.

Brigitte! Ah, yes; Brigitte was there by his side, and never was her company unwanted.

It seemed as if she had brought fresh inspiration to her task in life, had studied it anew, so that she disappeared when she was not needed, and made him aware of her presence only at moments when she could help him and encourage him.

For years he had been suffering the consequences of underfeeding in childhood and youth; now he was paying for his few weeks of dissipation with Astrid,

after trapesing about with her from restaurant to restaurant.

Only Brigitte knew how to put him on his feet again.

She would herself prepare some bland soup or other which would lie pleasantly in his stomach; she would administer the medicine prescribed by the family doctor; if at night he was kept awake with pains, she would get him a hot-water bottle and see that he did not burn himself by putting it unprotected next his skin. And there were many other kindly and loving services too numerous to recapitulate.

Thus, in spite of his age, he could allow himself the luxury of a passionate love affair, and could rely on appearing young and alert at the trysting place to greet his beloved.

If she should happen on occasion to repulse him, if the memory of that other man should intrude and should spoil their hour, he would calm his disappointment by saying: "No need to worry, Steffen, my man! This is no more than high days and festivals. At home you've got some one who never torments you. She holds the everyday in her hand —and it's the everyday that matters."

Summer advanced, and Berlin was becoming unbearable. But Steffen made no move. He was so immersed in his work that a mountain climb or a sea bathe, if you had suggested such things, would have seemed to him a crime.

Astrid, too, up till now had held courageously on her way. Not that she was devoting much energy to her painting. She had made a lot of acquaintances, and was often to be seen parading the hotel grounds in company with well-dressed and distinguished-looking foreigners. Occasionally Steffen would make one of the circle, but these social affairs had too little interest for him to knock about of an evening and lose his night's rest over them. Besides, Astrid was always ready to make herself free, if he happened to have an hour or so to spare and wished for her companionship.

Yet an evening came at last when she declared that the Berlin summer was quite unbearable any longer, and that she must go home where it was cooler.

"Why don't you come and stay with me? I've invited you both so many times. You know my place is not far from town, and we three would be inseparable."

He could not help laughing once more at the recollection of his and Brigitte's famous game. But he could not bring himself to accept Astrid's invitation.

He sought a middle course.

"Suppose we don't actually stay with you, at your place? You see for yourself it would hardly do. But we might take rooms in the neighbourhood."

"Agreed! If you put up somewhere in Copen-

hagen, my car could fetch you as often as you liked—and your manly dignity would not be wounded!"

Two days later Astrid came to pay a farewell call. Again she broached the subject of her friends' staying with her, insisting upon the delight of waking in the morning with the tang of salt sea air upon the lips and the view over the water through the widely opened window.

Brigitte could not contain herself for joy at such a prospect. But Steffen was not to be persuaded into changing his mind. He cast a reproachful glance at Astrid as he said:

"You know that it will be joy enough for us to be staying in the town around which our fancy has roamed these many years, and to drive out to see you from time to time. For that alone we shall owe you a debt of gratitude."

She pulled down the corner of her mouth, but had to be satisfied with such an arrangement.

Brigitte's happiness knew no bounds, so that she had to ring for Loni and take her drops to calm the beating of her heart!

When Astrid had said good-bye, and had gone, Brigitte turned to Steffen and said:

"Why should you object so greatly to staying at her place together with me? Even if you two were lovers—I know you are not, otherwise you would not be so kind to me—yes, yes, you have never been so sweet to me as you are now!—but even if you were

lovers, my one thought would be what a lot of good she was doing you, and I should not feel any slight to my position as your legal wife.—Of course it would not do for me to be informed officially of the state of affairs, that would not be seemly, but otherwise . . ."

And then, with an outburst, laughing to herself over the foolishness of such a reservation, she exclaimed:

"Ah me! What a lot of walls we do build up round us to be sure! As if this earthly course were not already narrow enough, in all conscience!"

A fortnight later, Astrid went off; and it was not long before he began making preparations for the journey, finding that life without her was hardly worth living.

Brigitte had had her trunks packed already.

On a drizzly morning towards the end of July, Steffen and Brigitte started on their journey. He felt rather depressed at the rain and the semi-darkness in which they had to take their departure. But nothing could damp Brigitte's spirits; and when the train steamed through her beloved Mecklenburg and the first beechwoods scattered their drops of moisture over her through the open window, she sent forth a hymn of jubilation.

Crossing the ferry was an added delight. Fancy just shunting their railway carriage on to a kind of boat! She could never have believed such a thing

possible. And the language all the people were talking, Danish, how sweetly it fell upon the ear.

The sumptuous repast that was served on board seemed to her well-nigh a crime in its extravagance, so used was she now to looking at every penny.

Lobster, indeed! Such a dish had not been seen in the Tromholt household since the war. She asked Steffen in a whisper:

"Won't it cost too much, dear?"

He reassured her, with a smile.

How lovely, too, when one sat breathing in the sea air; and when the spindrift flew lightly up, caught in the tangle of the breeze. True, she was a little overwhelmed by the elegance and smartness of all the appointments; but in the end she forgot this, and feasted heart and eyes on everything and everybody around her. She set her imagination to work, trying to penetrate the destinies of her fellow travellers, asking herself where this man came from, what this woman's life had brought her, whether the married couple over there was happy, or that other pair was merely putting a good face on perennial discord. A thousand stories were already taking shape in her brain.

Once landed on Danish soil, ever fresh marvels assailed her eyes. Cows wearing mackintoshes to keep off the rain—whoever could have imagined such a thing! And the square yards round the farmhouses, so scrubbed and scoured and snowy white; the cosy thatches—a roofing which was, alas, no longer to be

seen in Germany; and the cottage gardens full of flowers, with regular walls of orange lilies forming a red-gold background. Then there were those cyclopean churches, looking for all the world as if Olaf himself had been their architect. Yet, no! Olaf was a Norwegian; some other saint had brought Christianity to Denmark and its isles. What was his name? Ansgar, was it not? So long since that teacher's examination—how could she be expected to remember such details?

She talked and talked. Steffen became alarmed at the intensity of her excitement.

At Roskilde was the minster where the Danish kings were buried—did not Andersen mention it in one or other of his tales? And then, at last, Copenhagen itself in all its splendour!

Antiquities, as far as eye could compass. One no longer lived in the world of to-day. Three centuries ago, that's when one first saw the light of day, a contemporary of Frau Marie Grubbe—nay, one was Frau Marie Grubbe her very self—only that Steffen was such a capital companion, and one would not care to exchange him for a simple ferryman.

He had engaged rooms at the Angleterre.

"Oh, but, Steffen, dear, it's much too grand for us. I shall look such a terrible old frump. You darling Steffen, you!"

Her cheeks were aflame with their wonted hues, her eyes bright with excitement, just as if she had recaptured the joy of twenty years ago when they

went on their Italian pilgrimage. No thought could be spared for illness and the like.

On the morning after their arrival he phoned to Astrid, whose house was on the other side of the Charlotten Lund. An hour later she had joined them.

Fresh joy; and on the spot they agreed to go for a drive together.

A fine, green Rolls-Royce was fuming impatiently at the door.

It glided like a lizard through the crowded streets, along by the harbour with its noise and its bustle, through the peaceful realm of villas buried in trees and bushes, covering mile upon mile of the sea-front, interrupted from time to time by the luxuriant growth of beechwoods stretching down to the water's edge.

Sky and sea radiantly blue in the sunshine. There was, indeed, such an ocean of sunlight flooding everything, that even Brigitte's raptures and greedy eyes were not equal to drinking it all in.

What a pity that Steffen could not give himself up to the joy of the hour! He seemed not even now to have thrown off his early-morning depression.

Astrid, too, though she spoke gaily of this and of that, did not appear to be quite at her ease.

The car slipped through the park gates, which were flanked by sandstone lions, and careered along a gravel drive—just such a one as they had had at Neuheide. It drew up before a house that lay em-

bedded in flowers, simple and gracious in line, with a middle projection, giving on to a wide terrace, and two wings receding into the background. Brigitte alighted; but she could not pass the door immediately, so enthralled was she by the contemplation of the exterior.

Steffen nodded his head appreciatively, and then said, turning to Astrid:

"We have every reason to be grateful to you for having torn yourself away from this private paradise of yours to breathe our dust-laden air of Berlin and enliven us with your company."

"It is not difficult to build a paradise! We can do it in any spot we please, so long as there are loving hands to help."

They entered the hall, which was lighted by windows back and front. All the doors were standing wide open, and the gentle summer wind searched out every corner. Walls and ceilings were snowy white, though the former were panelled breast-high; the marble floors were strewn with Japanese straw mats.

Brigitte stood in the middle of the hall, breathing deeply. It seemed as if she were making provision for the time when she would again have to be content with breathing the exhausted air of the big town. Then she dropped into a roomy armchair, and said with a contented sigh:

"Oh, but I'd like to live here for ever!"

Astrid eagerly took her at her word, urging her

to stay; but Brigitte laughed gayly as she protested:

"No, no! You must not pin me down. Besides, my lord and master will never give his consent."

Her lord and master stood aloof, musing and distrait.

Astrid went over to him, and laid a hand gently on his arm. He came to earth again with a start, looked round, and then said apologetically:

"I'm awfully sorry. Do forgive me. I was thinking of Neuheide. It may have been no more than a barn compared to this, but it was paradise all the same for me."

"There, there, Steffen dear," said Brigitte soothingly. "Do try to enjoy the pleasures we have here and now. There are not so many more likely to come our way—at all events so far as I am concerned."

Steffen was smitten to the heart. He glanced over to where Astrid stood, and saw that her face, too, was clouded.

But this shadow passed, and everything which followed created an atmosphere of relaxation and well-being.

Lunch was served on the terrace at the back of the house, under the shade of a rose pergola. The meal over, Brigitte must have a rest; she had done more than enough already this wonderful forenoon. Steffen insisted that he be allowed to hover around, for though he longed to be alone with his dear mistress, he could not bring himself to this indulgence

here, while his wife was asleep. It would seem like a breach of confidence.

On peeping through the door, he saw that Brigitte was not lying down, after all, but had dragged a comfortable chair up to the open window leading to the balcony. She sat there, gazing dreamily out over the sea, her arms folded on her breast.

He came in very softly, and laid a hand on her head.

She did not start, but merely leaned backwards and looked up towards him with a smile.

"I had a notion you'd be coming," she said. "It's all too beautiful to enjoy quite by oneself." Then, after a pause: "I'm reminded of the time when we met on a similar sea-shore and you came and had lunch with me that first day on the balcony. Do you remember? I am so hoping you are no longer sorry for what you did then."

"What should I be sorry about?"

"That you came to look me up."

The old wound seemed about to bleed anew; then suddenly it became clear to him that there was no wound any more, that he was happy, happier than any mortal had ever been before!

He bent over her and kissed her forehead, saying very softly:

"Thank you."

She sighed and closed her eyes. Lying back in her chair, she was so still, so very still, that one would have fancied she must be asleep.

Steffen thought: "She, too, is happy at last."

For a whole week thereafter, each day brought its own special delight. They lunched or dined with Astrid, while the remainder of the time was spent in study and in sightseeing.

First and foremost among delights was the Glyptotek with its unrivalled store of treasures. They could hardly credit the things they saw, so amazing was the collection. There were Greek statues side by side with the best that modern France and her Scandinavian brethren could produce; upstairs, there were pictures by foreign masters; indeed, there was no end to it all.

"One last joy I hope will be ours—even if I do not live to experience it actually with you," said Brigitte. "I'd like everything you have ever painted to be placed in one vast collection. If that could be done, then the world would realise what a supreme artist you are."

Always, and always, when she saw the great achievements of other masters, she was careful to ensure that her Steffen should not be a prey to discouragement.

She was an indefatigable sightseer; but Steffen knew when she had done enough, and brought his authority to bear so that she put a curb on her enthusiasm.

He settled her comfortably in her room at the hotel, and then went out for a stroll. As chance would have it, he ran up against Astrid in the hall,

and this was the first time they had been alone since the Tromholts had arrived.

She stepped forward with a queenly air, while the guests who happened to be there greeted her deferentially. And yet Steffen could not help observing a peculiar and ambiguous smile on their faces as soon as she had passed by. He felt uneasy.

She held out her hand frankly to him, and offered to take him to see something rare and beautiful.

They went to the Art Museum, where he had not been before.

"We'll look at the Rembrandts later," she said. "But first of all let's enjoy our few moments of solitude."

She led him to the room where the plaster casts were kept. It was in the basement, and no one ever dreamed of going to this subterranean closet.

"Nearly everybody understands German, here," she informed him, "and I am terribly under observation."

"You seem to be rather a rare bird, I must say, judging by the way people look at you," he laughed.

"I'm almost a monster," she answered scornfully. "They think a lot of the English here—especially since the war. A woman of Danish birth who flings away a title together with rank and station and fortune—for my connection with that man has not been kept a secret—must be 'toquée' to say the least of it. Besides, they've heard rumours about other things I have done in the course of my career—how much has

filtered through, I know not; but they are in a perennial state of astonishment and vexation!"

"And what has your family to say?"

Her face clouded.

"Oh, dear, it's all so silly! My two brothers are such excellent business men that they have not shrunk from making capital out of the romantic side of my life! But there are my unhappy sisters-in-law! It is a real work of art to know just how to deal with them. Our family has a big house here in town, and one floor belongs to me by rights. Only, if I live there, we're bound to meet sometimes. They haven't courage to face a scene of any kind, and if they had, I could not resist turning it all into ridicule. Anyway, the whole thing would be enough to make a cat laugh. If it would give you any pleasure, I'll take you along one day, and introduce you . . ."

He thanked her, smilingly declined her invitation, and therewith the subject was closed.

"You were quite right to refuse to put up at my place. One's imagination does not suffice to conceive of the misinterpretations such a visit would give rise to. It's simply amazing . . . Do you know, every time I see your wife, I like her better. I even feel a certain abhorrence of you because you stand there between us, secretly aloof."

"I don't do anything of the sort," he expostulated. "The more you and she take to one another, the better pleased I am. You are becoming daily more a part of her, so far as I am concerned."

"And is she becoming a part of me?"

Steffen was silent, and she went on:

"You see, you don't give me a chance! I have every reason to be jealous. Since I am not, I would like you to know how greatly I consider her my superior. Your admiration for me may make you think that I have innumerable merits, but at least you must admit that I have not a trace of her all-embracing kindliness."

"The very fact that you should say so proves the contrary," he rejoined, taking her hand in his.

But she drew away.

"No, no," she said, "even these plaster casts have ears to hear and tongues to tell tales. Besides, so long as you are more or less my guests, I don't want any endearments between you and me. When I'm in her company, I often catch myself avoiding your eyes, lest our understanding should flame up in them, and thus betray us. I've developed a very tender conscience, have I not?"

"Since you left Berlin, eh?"

"We mortals are a veritable salad of contradictions! We can't change our spots."

Then, in a different tone:

"Come! Rembrandt is waiting upstairs to say how d'you do to his successor."

Their last day was devoted to visiting the various palaces and castles, these northern strongholds buried in charming landscapes, dreaming their beautiful dreams of long ago, save when, as is the case with

Frederiksborg, they have been re-equipped with the beauties of a later age.

There is not one specimen of architecture in German lands, not even Ottheinrichsbau itself, that can offer the fascination of this northern Renaissance building, this royal castle, lying secluded from the world, and to which one can only obtain access if one starts as on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Any way that's what Brigitte declared in her enthusiasm; and Steffen agreed.

Then they went on to Elsinore, where the Kronborg—no longer menacing, but all the more impressive in its dismantled greyness—looks across the straits towards Sweden, the foe of other days.

Brigitte wanted to see the terrace where Hamlet had encountered the ghost of his father; but there was little of note there except a sort of toy cannon which was still good enough to fire salutes and nothing more.

Then they made a detour to Fredensborg, where (as if in mockery of the name) Europe's step-father may have conceived the world war.

There lay the famous park before them, with its marvellous avenues whose tree-tops seemed to be storming the heavens. Steffen wished to explore them all, but Brigitte was by now too wearied to lend herself to any such exertion, so she and Astrid stayed behind in the shade, while he went off by himself and was soon lost in the dim vistas.

"How happy he is! How young he is! And we

have only you to thank for it all," said Brigitte, gazing after his retreating figure.

With a disclaimer that was half genuine modesty and half assumed, Astrid pooh-poohed any such suggestion.

"No," said Brigitte decisively, "we have got to say so honestly at least once. Ever since you have entered our lives, he has been as one rejuvenated; he has been inspired with new creative ability and with new hopes. He could no longer find those things in me, for I am faced with nothing else but death, whereas what he needs is life, more and more life, multiplied a thousandfold. You can imagine how wretched I felt when I saw that, in my company, he became duller and duller, lonelier and lonelier. No one can be expected to gnaw his own paws for all eternity—and I had no fresh dishes to offer. Perhaps all artists have to live through such a time; maybe other folk as well. But what can one do to help them? It's a question of perpetual rebirth, and that's just what is lacking. The human body is said to renew itself every seven years—at least scientific men tell us so—but an artist needs to be renewed with every coming day, otherwise his work gets out of touch with the times. And he, poor dear, found nothing but me, every day, always me—how could his art be expected to flourish!"

"And what about you yourself, Frau Tromholt?"

Brigitte looked surprised. A blush of alarm swept over her face.

"What do you mean? I was speaking of myself," she stammered.

"No, you were speaking of him, always of him. But you, too, are somebody. You, too, have created beautiful things, very beautiful things. Have you never had regrets about yourself? Have you never feared that the wealth within you might be irrevocably lost?"

The pained, defenceless smile which was so often to be seen on Brigitte's lips, a smile which betrayed the innermost sorrow of her life, played about her mouth. She sighed as she said:

"Ah well, we don't talk about that this long while now. I myself hardly ever think of it. The last time I had any regrets was when you, Astrid my dear, were so sweet as to remind my friends of my little efforts in the literary vein. I don't care to write any more now. I have only one thing in the world over which I must watch and for which I must act as manager, so long as life is still granted me, and that one thing is my husband's art and my husband's life. My only regret has always been that I have accomplished so little in this respect. Since you came I've been easier in my mind."

Astrid turned her head away to hide the tears which had sprung unbidden to her eyes.

For a moment she felt that now she should disregard the sense of shame which overwhelmed her, should make full confession to the wife of the man she loved.

But she got a grip on herself again, and was able to lead the conversation back into less perilous paths.

"I cannot do much, unfortunately," she replied at last. "One has to be so careful. What of custom, and gossip, one's way is not always as smooth as it might be."

"Careful? Are you referring to me, my dear?"

"Of course, Frau Tromholt, you, among others," said Astrid, showing a bold front. "I dare not incur any risks where you are concerned! You spoke about his being lonely. If I can do anything to liven him up, would you object, or would you like me to go forward?"

"You are livening him up already—and that is always a fresh joy to me, whenever I think of it."

"I had another idea in view. The acquaintances I've been able to make in Berlin give me an opportunity to play the hostess a little; I can offer something, I think, that will appeal to him as an artist. Anyway I want to clear out of that hotel and make a home for myself. I have thought of transferring to Berlin what furniture and other belongings I have here, of setting up house there, of inaugurating a place where I can receive my guests properly. All kinds of birds would come flying in, and then go on their way again; and I am sure he'd get a lot of pleasure out of them, without having in any way to reciprocate. How do you like my notion?"

"Ah," exclaimed Brigitte, clasping her hands, "that's precisely what has been lacking to his life.

I could never provide him with such things, I was always a drag on him. For once a man is married, he has to take his wife about with him wherever he goes; and though I love meeting people, I cannot any longer, I cannot . . ."

Again that bitter smile clouded her face, as she added: "I don't want to any more."

"Maybe you'll change your mind," said Astrid, comfortingly and coaxingly.

But Brigitte protested in alarm:

"No, no! Please don't tempt me. Neither you nor he must place temptation in my path. Otherwise this hope, too, will go the way of all the others. That must not be!"

She seized her friend's hands in hers, feeling that there was much more she would like to confide in this hour of intimacy. But here was Steffen returning from his voyage of discovery, and here was the custodian following at his heels.

"What are you two up to? You look as if you were hatching a conspiracy against me," said Steffen gaily.

The custodian rattled his keys, and they knew that they must depart.

CHAPTER XXXVI

The memories of this visit to Copenhagen were inexpressibly sweet.

It was obvious that Brigitte's lively temperament had been hungering for fresh experience, such as the weeks spent at the familiar Nauheim were incompetent to provide. Neither her desires nor her capacity to see and take in new scenes had been satisfied at the German watering place. The Danish holiday, on the other hand, had acted as a tonic; so much so, indeed, that, as autumn approached, she came forward with another suggestion, a modest one, it is true, but one she sincerely hoped Steffen would fall in with. Tucked away there in a remote and secluded part of East Prussia, her sister was living, "Aunt Pauline," for whom she had retained a warm affection.

All through her married life Brigitte had made a point of visiting this sister, had gone to see her once every three years or so. She would then fit herself in to the Philistine life of those around her, relishing the humdrum surroundings, sitting primly on the old-fashioned sofa with its chintz cover, allowing herself to bask in the warmth of the sun and of her sister's love, and enjoying the luxury of having no one to look after. What a holiday!

On these occasions her talent as an imaginative

writer would throw out fresh blossoms—frail blossoms, one must admit, for the plant from which they sprang had been deprived so long of light and air. She, who at home could be persuaded only with difficulty to sit down at her writing-table, would return from these visits with a goodly sized packet of manuscripts which she would lay with pride before Steffen. He would read them, and would make acquaintance with a whole world of living and clearly drawn personalities, before packing the stories away for ever.

"If you will let me go this time," she said beseechingly, "I promise to bring you back something that will be worth your while to read. My head is seething with ideas since our little jollification in Denmark, so many of them that I scarcely know how to begin to set them down on paper."

He was a trifle reluctant, for he felt lost if she were absent, and his anxiety over her health never left him a moment's peace. Still, he recognised that just now she was really as well as it was reasonable ever to expect her to be, and so in the end he put no obstacles in her way.

Never had he felt so forsaken as he did during the days that followed Brigitte's departure. How could he tolerate the void? Both wife and mistress away! He, all alone . . .

The restlessness to which he again became a prey prevented him from getting on with his work. He could not settle down to anything. To fill out the

time, therefore, he dragged his huge canvas of *The Deluge* from its hiding-place, the unfinished picture which had won Astrid's approval so long ago. It had been rolled up and thrust away in one of the cupboards under the roof, just as he had brought it back from Paris more than ten years before; and no one, not even Brigitte, had ever clapped eyes on it. He would have found a difficulty in explaining why he had hidden it out of her sight; now, however, he wished to arouse her enthusiasm as soon as she came home again.

This canvas was truly monstrous in its proportions. The carpenter had his work cut out for many days to get it set up in a new framework, and when at last it stood in the proper light, Steffen was abashed at the boldness of the conception and the massive effect of so many bodies and limbs.

He could not disguise from himself that the picture was full of flaws. They were even plainer to him now than they had been that day in Christensen's studio when he had seen it again after so long a burial. Yet he could not summon up courage to set matters to rights. He contented himself with improving minor details; the more important corrections he would reserve for a later day. First of all he must have Brigitte's comments, hear her cry of surprise; then he would know, and not till then, where he had to begin.

For hours on end he would sit before his giant canvas, talking himself into a veritable fever of admira-

tion, so that at long last he persuaded himself that this picture was the greatest of his achievements.

Day followed day, and still no work was done.

At length a wire arrived announcing Brigitte's return. She came back a great deal better and more invigorated than after her stay in Nauheim. As usual, almost the first words she uttered were: "What have you done while I've been away?"

He preceded her up the winding stair, and, strange to relate, felt no triumphant emotion gripping at his throat. On the contrary, he was aware, for some unaccountable reason, that his conscience was pricking him.

As she entered the studio, the exclamation of surprise he had expected was forthcoming. Then she sat down and contemplated the canvas in silence for many minutes. He took up a position behind her, making the necessary explanations and comments as to how he had conceived the idea, and so forth. All the while he was awaiting her first words with trepidation.

Then, hesitant and reflective, she said:

"Of course I know it's unfinished. But, please forgive me, I cannot say truthfully that I like it. I fail to recognise the emotionalism that finds expression here, as a part of you and your art. It gives me the feeling that it is the work of a prentice hand —and yet you were already a master when you painted it. The contrasts are too crude for my taste; those basalt organ-pipes are too perpendicular;

the curve of the waves is too conventionalised, too much thought-out. . . . I'm sorry, Steffen darling! You would not have me give any but my honest opinion—would you?"

He, so persuaded was he of the admirable quality of the half-completed work, looked at first as if he would combat the unexpected criticism, which he felt he did not deserve. Maybe she had an inkling that this was a memorial of his revolt, of his impulse to escape from the shallows of connubial life. Might not the disfavour with which she contemplated *The Deluge* be the expression of a belated vengeance? But this antagonistic surmise was quickly chased away by the recollection of the unstinted enthusiasm with which she had always rallied to his side wherever his work was concerned. He succeeded, therefore, in swallowing his mortification.

"One thing surprises me, if you have never worked at it since that time," she continued. "The woman lifting the child to safety is something like Astrid. It would seem that she must have sat to you—I can't quite understand . . ."

He felt the colour rushing to his cheeks, just as if he were a young girl caught red-handed, for he suddenly remembered that he had worked at the figure of the woman immediately after he had seen Astrid posing as the wounded Amazon. Not only had the face been altered, but the lines of the body had been brought into conformity with Astrid's. Luckily, Brigitte could not possibly guess this.

As he made what explanation he could on the spur of the moment, he thought: "She has been proved amply right in refusing to pose for me!"

When they were back in the sitting-room, he inquired what Brigitte had written during her absence.

"This time I hope you'll have got something the publishers will jump at, my dear," he said pleasantly.

All she did was to bow her head, and to make no reply.

Since he pressed for an answer, she at length explained that, though she had made every effort to do some writing, nothing had come of it; hand and brain seemed to be paralysed, and she had been obsessed with the idea that it was too late.

He did his best to efface this mood of discouragement; but his words lacked conviction, for in his inner self he shuddered at the realisation that she had sacrificed her creative possibilities on his account.

Astrid returned to Berlin in the beginning of October.

She was looking wonderfully well, very sunburnt, and said she had been sea bathing almost to the last.

Brigitte received her with open arms.

"Do you know," she said laughingly, "whenever we now play our little game of 'going to Copenhagen' we look at one another like two schoolchildren with a secret, about which everybody has already been informed—you, first of all, Astrid."

Then she recalled the joy of sitting at the windows

in Astrid's country house, of wandering through the pleasant rooms, of revelling in the cataract of light and air.

"Yes, it's all very well in summer," answered Astrid. "But it has been damp and foggy of late. A little more, and I would have gone to stay in the town flat. A couple of the rooms are being cleared now, and I expect most of the furniture is on its way here."

Steffen, nonplussed, asked the reason for this removal. Then it all came out. She had been to Berlin since they had left Copenhagen, on the quiet; had hunted up suitable quarters where she looked forward to entertaining her friends. She could not stand hotel life any longer.

Brigitte looked at Steffen in alarm, for he stood biting his lips, obviously vexed that Astrid should have failed to tell him of her presence in Berlin. Besides, her wish to cut a figure in Berlin society seemed to imply a determination to exclude him from her life. He was immediately tortured with the idea: "This is the beginning of the end."

But as soon as she had gone, Brigitte asked:

"Do you guess at all for whom Astrid is planning these things?"

"How should I know?"

"For you."

He laughed his scorn.

"Yes, for you, and for no one else," said Brigitte.

She told him what had passed between her and

their friend in the summer, how grieved she was that, because of her poor health, he should be cut off from the society he enjoyed, how her most heartfelt wish was that he should get into a circle of friends and acquaintances, whom he could see or not as he pleased, without any need for entertaining in his turn.

"Astrid proposes to create just such a circle for you, a circle where you can go and enjoy yourself without being hampered by my being with you. Few of the people there will know you are a married man. And if anybody should happen to enquire, you need but say that your wife is an invalid—and you won't even have had to tell a lie."

In a trice his moodiness vanished. Astrid had not, then, been planning to get rid of him; quite the contrary; she, too, was eager to make sacrifice on his behalf!

Next day he went to see her, for on taking leave she had whispered: "At my studio. To-morrow. Four o'clock."

He found her at work on the pictures she had begun that summer. He greeted her perfunctorily, seized brushes and palette, and, in a few masterly strokes, indicated where she had gone wrong and what direction her work should take.

She looked on appreciatively, and yet a spark of impatience was alight in her eyes. At last she could contain herself no longer, and exclaimed:

"Granted you are a great master and that I honour

you accordingly; but—have you nothing special to say to me?"

"This is what seems to me more important than anything else—unless you want me to become nothing but a toady."

She frowned, and asked indignantly:

"What do you mean me to understand by that?"

"Is it true that you are setting up house here only on my account?"

She evaded the issue.

"I am still keeping on my flat at home; indeed, only two rooms have been shut up there, and the contents removed here to furnish my present quarters. Besides—" She hesitated to continue.

"Besides?"

"Oh, how am to explain? I don't feel I can! Won't it seem an indignity, once it is actually phrased in words?"

"Well, you can cut short the preliminaries," he answered.

She pulled up a chair quite close to where he was sitting, and leaned her elbows on his knee. The blue fire from her eyes played over him, as she said:

"If I once begin telling the truth, I shall have to speak the whole truth, neither more nor less. When we made our pact last spring, you were content to be nothing better than a stop-gap, and were reconciled to the idea of our relationship lasting only six months . . . The half year is up. The spectre which was

sapping my life-blood has been laid—or, at all events, it has become so tenuous that I need fear it no longer. I have to thank you for this—and for much besides. Come closer, that I may whisper it in your ear. I know I must have been an awful nuisance to you, over and over again; I was so unhappy, and so homeless. All that is now at an end, for I have found a home. You are my home. I—love you, my darling."

He did not clasp her in his arms, murmuring terms of endearment, but sat gazing through her and beyond her, and thinking: "How can a man be granted so much happiness, and survive?"

Thereupon Brigitte's image rose up before him and he recalled how her first aim had always been to ensure his happiness—with the result that they had both suffered so grievously, he through her, and she through him.

Did his lips utter her name? He knew not; but Astrid began of a sudden to speak of her.

"Brigitte! What are we to do about Brigritte, so that her mind may remain unclouded, so that she shall not be hurt in any way?"

He said nothing, and she continued:

"What's the matter, dear? I've been saying all kinds of nice things to you, and you've not uttered a word to tell me if you are pleased . . ."

"Astrid!"

"There, there," she said coaxingly, "I know. I understand. As I told you already, I am so fond

of your wife that, though I love you, it seems to me sometimes as if I loved her better! Oh, perhaps I should say that I can't think of you two apart. We must guard her, my dearest, must see that no sorrow comes near her. We owe her that much!"

Steffen felt a pang of conscience, not merely because of the reminder of an obvious marital duty, but because he was pained for Brigitte's sake that she should have to accept favours at the hands of his mistress.

Yet Astrid's generosity of heart forced him to trim his sails and to lend himself to her mood without demur. So all he asked was:

"What can we do?"

"In the first place, you must not let her starve."

"Starve? What's she starving for?"

"For the outer world; for people."

"Impossible! She's not strong enough to stand social life. If ever we have a party at home, she is prostrate for three days afterwards."

"That's quite another matter. Her responsibilities as hostess overwhelm her, there. Have a try, anyway, and I'll lend a hand. Just picture the case to yourself. Here is a woman—more of an artist than any of us, perhaps—whose imagination has fed this long while past on books alone. She must feel strangled at times. Have pity on her. And even if for the moment she has to suffer from her exertions, the aftermath will be worth the discomfort."

Thereupon they agreed that Brigitte should be persuaded to make one of the house-warming party.

For the next few weeks the flat rang with the sound of many hammers and the moving of furniture and the voices of workpeople. Steffen slaved like a nigger, hardly leaving himself a free moment for even the most urgent claims of his work.

The furniture she had inherited from her parents, patrician and stiff in style, had its austerity softened by various happy touches of Astrid's feminine fancy, so that the three reception rooms looked really charming as one entered. Some Copenhagen ware she had bought before leaving for Berlin imparted a youthful aspect to the old-fashioned equipment; while new carpets gave a luxurious stamp to the whole.

Invitations went out; the Tromholts duly receiving one as well.

Brigitte smiled as she read it, and, after a while she said demurely:

"Of course I recognise that I ought to be on hand, since, for social reasons, your relations with Astrid should be openly sanctioned by me. I won't go to an evening party. You have not expected that from me for years. But I want to show my good will to Astrid, and if she could begin with an afternoon tea-party . . . It would have to be a simple affair, for, as you know, I haven't bought any new dresses since the beginning of the war."

Ah, yes, he knew that only too well! Her things

had been turned and altered and remade by some little dressmaker or the other for years now. She had always refused to get anything new, fobbing him off with the words: "It's a pity to waste money on such things."

Astrid immediately lent herself to her friends' idea; and, under pretext of greater intimacy, a few of the more important and more influential personalities of her circle were asked to the preliminary canter. This was to be followed by an "impromptu" supper party which had been carefully prepared to produce the effect of improvisation.

Having fallen in with these arrangements, Brigitte gave herself up to joyful preparations.

"Do I look all right? I'll not make you feel ashamed of me, shall I?"

Again and again she put the questions; and each time Steffen answered yes or no as occasion demanded. His heart was singing within him. She did certainly look nice. Her figure, though matronly, had fined down during the famine period of the war, and had never regained its unseemly proportions. It was once more not far removed from the Rubenesque stateliness of former days.

Though her dress was a little out of date, it had been so skilfully altered as to produce a charming effect; and her pretty diamond ear-rings sparkled in a way which put her on an equal footing with any of the spoiled children of fortune.

She sat in the place of honour, on the green velvet

sofa with its mahogany lions at either end; her cheeks once again sported their paint-box hues, and she turned her head this way and that, eagerly listening and talking to the assembled guests.

The fashionably dressed foreign ladies—as Steffen was quick to perceive—were eager to be noticed by her; she, for her part, was gracious and serene, her sweet face lit with smiles.

Astrid had drawn up a chair so as to sit near her, and it was natural that their hands should meet on the mahogany body of the lion—the conscious assumption of such a pose was alien to their natures, but the present intimacy just *had* to be.

The hours passed so pleasantly that, before any one had thought of taking leave, there was Vibeke announcing in the queerest of German that supper was served.

Some of the guests, who had other engagements, hurried off; but the majority remained, and Brigitte, radiant and happy, cast a questioning look at Steffen, which he answered with a nod.

But when the meal was over she became very pale, and there was an expression on her face that was almost unearthly in its ecstasy. She no longer took part in the conversation, but her eyes flitted from one speaker to the other as if she would read their innermost hearts.

Steffen looked on troubled, yet he did not venture to interfere. Astrid, after a while, stepped up to him, saying in a whisper:

"You'd better take her away. It's too much for her."

Brigitte entered no protest, and followed her husband obediently from the room.

When they got home, she took both his hands in hers, saying:

"I want to thank you, too."

"Why thank me?"

"Because you took me along with you."

"Ah, my dear, that sounds rather reproachful. It really depends on you, and your health. I'm always so afraid you'll get knocked up."

She did not answer, but nodded pensively; and in the smile that hovered about her mouth he could read a whole lifetime of sadness.

Steffen's mind was now always so cheerful, he was so clear-headed these days, that he could grasp the full significance of Brigitte's renouncements on his behalf, whereas when he likewise had been on a self-denying ordinance he had been too wretched and too stupid to understand anything. Henceforward, he said to himself, he would give her all her heart desired, so that once again she might become the cheerful, happy woman she had been.

But his good resolutions were not of much avail. His fears proved too well grounded, for Brigitte's health was so precarious that every time she went to a party she was indisposed for days afterwards.

Nevertheless, the few occasions when he was able

to take her with him had sufficed to fill her mind with agreeable visions, and her joy knew no end.

She had kept to her decision not to go to the big house-warming party, but Astrid was not discouraged.

"I've gained my point, all the same," she said, "the ill-effects are transitory, whereas the spiritual excitement remains. We must think out yet other things that may give her pleasure."

For the first time since the war, the press ball was to take place. Everybody who was anybody, or wished to be, was hoping to be present at this great social festivity. Like all functions in which the court had been wont to participate in the old days, it had been discountenanced of late; now it was being organised once more, with a special view to giving a fillip to Berlinese society.

On Christmas Eve the Tromholts had asked Astrid to dinner, their only guest. The tree had been lighted—how doubly gay did the candles seem to shine, how bright and joyful were the eyes of the three friends as they sat down to their meal together. Then, when the carps were filling the air with their appetising fragrance, Astrid said plaintively:

"I've heard so much about this press ball of yours, and I should so love to go. But I know of no family which would care to take me along; so I suppose I must just stay quietly at home after all."

Steffen, unable to read what was in her mind,

glanced at her questioningly, for there were dozens of families which would be only too pleased to offer their services in the matter. But Brigitte began forthwith to make plans, to think of this person or the other as a suitable chaperon for her friend. Yet nobody she could mention seemed to meet with Astrid's approval.

"There are plenty of people like that, and to spare," she protested. "But when one is out of touch with those who are navigating the same waters, one is apt to feel a derelict in such an ocean of humanity. Of course if I could go with you two dear people, that would be absolutely delightful."

"How can I?" exclaimed Brigitte, alarmed at the idea. In the old days, she and Steffen had never missed this winter festival; indeed, as chairman of the Artists' Society, he had to go in his official capacity. But that was so long ago, so very long ago . . .

Astrid was speaking again:

"I've had such lovely Christmas presents, it seems greedy to want more; but this would really be the most beautiful of them all."

"How can I?" exclaimed Brigitte again, pressing her hand to her heart.

And yet, since it was Christmas Eve, and both looked so eagerly expectant—yes, Steffen too, that was obvious—she could not gainsay them, but asked for time to think possibilities over.

"What do you want to think things over for?

Courage, dear! Give your consent now," cried Steffen.

"You'll only be ashamed of me when the time comes," she said.

"Oh," he exclaimed gruffly, colouring a deep red. If he had ever been ashamed in his life, he certainly was so now—ashamed of the feelings he had once entertained.

She realised it in an instant, and was so full of compunction that the word "yes" slipped out before she was aware.

In a burst of gratitude Astrid rose, and flung her arms round Brigitte's neck. The look she exchanged with Steffen would have informed Brigitte how shamelessly the two conspirators were plotting for her happiness. But luckily she saw nothing, and was delighted at her own heroism.

Her joy in anticipation of the event was so great that for weeks afterwards the house echoed to the crooning of her favourite song, *The Waves Are Splashing and Singing*. How long it was since she had sung it!

Preparations were soon in full swing.

She still possessed two lace dresses from her pre-war outfit, a black one and a white. Each had cost a fortune in its day. But one had had so much money to play about with then! Besides, real lace always has a value of its own.

Of course there was no question of doing anything with the white one. In the black, she would be so

far less conspicuous; she would slip through the throng in that as if she had donned a cap of invisibility.

The little dressmaker had been summoned, and stood speechless before such a costly garment. She was clever at her job, and soon a gown was confectioned that could rival for elegance any of the "creations" of the famous houses. But there could not be much fitting on, for Brigitte was easily exhausted.

As the day approached, doubts began to rise in her mind. Horrible visions of other times danced before her eyes; she saw herself sitting forlorn in a corner, saw Steffen's look of disapproval travelling over her ungainly form. Now, it is true, the hard times had made her comely again, but it was too late, she did not want to go about, she could not go about in society, she was too tired, too tired . . .

"Steffen darling, I really don't think I can run the risk. It will be so tiring for me. You'd better leave me at home."

He protested, he felt angry; in the end he pulled himself together, saying as he stroked her hand:

"There, there, my dear! It's only a temporary set-back. You'll soon feel otherwise."

She yielded.

But on the morning of the great day her anxiety grew to such proportions that she was at her wit's end how to get out of her engagement. She ran hither and thither like a hunted animal; said she had such

a lot to attend to—although every detail had been thought out long before.

Steffen was uneasy; he knew these restless moods of hers too well not to have a foreboding of disaster. What a blessing that she had been so docile and gone to bed when he had suggested a rest. Might she not pick up strength for the evening?

At four o'clock the hairdresser came—he was a very busy man to-day! And now she sat with waved and carefully dressed locks, her eyebrows slightly touched, her cheeks and neck dabbed with eau de lys. She sat and sat and sat, smiling at her reflection in the mirror.

Then she forced herself to disinter the jewellery Steffen had given her in the years of their prosperity. Besides the diamond ear-rings there was a ruby necklace mounted Indian fashion, and of that wonderful pigeon's-blood hue which has always been so prized by connoisseurs. There was also a long string of emeralds and artificial pearls with gold-links, reaching to her waist—real pearls she had never had; just when Steffen was going to get her some, they had become too poor to afford the luxury.

And there were many other treasures besides. She tried everything on, first this and then that; and, all the while, the sad and weary smile never left her face.

Six o'clock struck; then seven.

She rang the bell.

"Loni, will you please ask Master to come down."

He came in, enquiring:

"What's the matter? How are you?"

"Steffen darling, you must forgive me—and Astrid must too—but I really cannot go to this ball. I can't, truly, with the best will in the world."

He bit his lips, trying to control the storm of anger which was rising within him.

"There are three hours before we need start, my dear. You'll feel all right by then, I'm positive. Just get dressed, and . . ." He dared not speak further, lest he should lose all self-control.

"No, no, Steffen dear. I've thought it all out. I should only be a burden. You must go with Astrid and put me out of account."

"But I can't go alone with Astrid. Every second person knows me. It would be a slap in the face of the world in general—and a slap in your face as well. It's really out of the question."

"In that case, I don't know what to do."

His temper got the better of him.

"It's one of your caprices. Spoil-sport, that's what you are; and one of the most flagrant and ruthless at that!"

He fumed and fretted. She knew his bark was worse than his bite—had she not had a lifetime of experience? But to-day she felt too weak to coax him back into a sunny humour. Then, all of a sudden, she was seized with despair. Rumpling her carefully dressed hair, she began to weep convulsively, and to babble:

"Has it never struck you that I, too, am a human being? That I, too, may possess a life of my own? That I'm not just a doormat for you to trample on? If I say I can't go with you, I can't, and that's an end of it. Don't ask why—don't ask any questions at all. Let me die quietly in my corner. I want no further truck with the things of this world."

He was profoundly shaken at the mood he had thus conjured up; moreover, he dreaded lest she should succumb to one of her nervous attacks which, thank God, had not occurred for a long while now.

Hoping to bring her back to tranquillity, no better idea occurred to him than to tell her why Astrid had wanted them both to accompany her for this evening's festivity. By the time Brigitte was composed enough to listen, he felt he had her in hand again.

"Oh, the darling! How noble-hearted she is. Now I know that you are well provided for the future—since she will remain after I am gone."

He did not allow himself time to take in the full significance of these words, but a vague sorrow gnawed at his heart nevertheless.

They must at once let Astrid know. By good luck she was at home when he rang her up, was dressing for the party. Before he had time to utter a word, she was saying:

"Brigitte does not want to come. I feared as much."

But she was taken by surprise when he announced his intention of staying at home likewise.

"Why?"

"In any case I'm only tolerated in those circles, and you will be claimed by so many. Besides I am needed here, at home, to-night."

So saying he hung up the receiver.

"Aren't you going to dress?" Brigitte asked as he sat longer than usual over his supper.

He told her of his resolution to stay with her and not go to the ball. This time she was really angry.

"You are only trying to force me to do your will. That's grossly unfair."

"There, there, dear; try to be calm. I'm no ballet-dancer, and shall certainly not break my heart if I don't go. I wouldn't go with you now, even if you were well enough."

She sighed deeply. Then she said, staring into the void:

"We have had to forgo so much in our lives . . ."

But when he invited her up into his studio, she became her cheerful self again.

She got him to lie on the couch, and light his pipe. Then she ensconced herself in her customary place between his feet.

And now, for a little change, they would make a journey to Copenhagen. . . .

Book Five
THE VICTRESS

CHAPTER XXXVII

With the coming of spring, Steffen Tromholt made up his mind to get to work in earnest on his *Deluge*.

The four panels were finished; he had several pictures ready for the spring exhibition—among others that study of the couple in the Opera box. No worries of any kind were in the air; he was enjoying the fullest tide of vigour, and had plenty of time on his hands to do as he liked in.

At first when he told Brigitte his intentions, she looked almost alarmed. He, misinterpreting her expression, asked in rather an aggrieved tone:

"Don't you think it's worth the trouble?"

Whereupon she indignantly rejoined:

"How can you imagine such a thing! All I was concerned about was the amount of labour it will entail. You'll need such a tremendous time before completing it to your satisfaction. Once you start work on it you'll find that there will be precious little of the old stuff you will consider fit to use. You have progressed pretty considerably since then, you know."

"Do you honestly think so?"

Her reply came as a soothing balsam to his soul.

"Oh, Steffen darling!"

That was all she said, but her meaning was obvious.

"And to think of the fuss they used to make about me in those days," said he, rather disconsolately.

"Just give them a chance of seeing your life's work," she answered, full of enthusiasm. "They'd sit up and take notice soon enough in that case. If only I could live to see the day!"

Brigitte flung her arms wide, and no gesture could have better expressed the infinitude of her yearning.

"Were it not for you—" Steffen mused; but he did not complete his thought.

Except for Brigitte, no one had a word of praise to spare for him now; not even Astrid. The latter always took what he did for granted; she could see nothing but the master in him, a master to whom successful creation came as a matter of course. Apart from these two women, there was not another soul in the world to take an interest in his work. Even Naschke, since the collapse of his business as an art dealer, took no further notice of Tromholt's achievements. Why should he? There were still two of Steffen's pictures hanging on those red-brocade walls awaiting a purchaser. Yet though every one who saw them pronounced them "very effective," no one seemed prepared to buy.

Since Maxel had beaten the big drum about the panels, it would have been politic to exhibit them before sending them to Neuheide, and room would certainly have been found for them in any of the forthcoming exhibitions. But Herr Piefke was becoming impatient. The contract time was already

long overpassed, and he had set his heart on having the pictures in place to greet his first guests at Neuheide that summer.

It was, therefore, of supreme importance that *The Deluge* should successfully combine the attributes of a youthful ardour, a pristine defiance and imagination, with the perfect maturity which age alone can bring. Everything which could in any way recall the "gammon" of former days, must be obliterated. All that must be permitted to survive was the dream content, the vision, the foreboding, the symbolism.

First of all, away with those organ-pipes! He realised how inappropriate they were as soon as he came to design the thing that was to replace them. "How could I ever have tolerated such monstrosities?" he thought.

Brigitte was delighted.

More than ever she saw to it that no jars should interfere with his work. Nothing was to disturb the Master. The whole household went about on tiptoe as it were; and when he came down to his meals he was served exclusively with the dishes he liked best.

If Brigitte had effaced herself in the past, it was nothing when compared with what she did now. She would sit for hours at a time in some out-of-the-way corner, stitching and stitching, while one beautiful piece of needlework after another accumulated under her hands—which, alas, were so often weary these days.

When Steffen asked her to come up to the studio, she responded eagerly to his call—if she felt strong enough.

Sometimes she could not manage the exertion, and when he sought her out at lunch time, he would find her in bed.

"Don't be vexed, Steffen darling. I am so very tired."

He would have the meal served on a table at her bedside, and she would immediately look upon it as a little festivity, laughing and joking all the time it lasted.

No longer would she allow him to have the door between their rooms open at night. Steffen might protest as he pleased, Brigitte remained adamant.

"You are working so hard, dear; models half the day, and all. If you don't get your proper rest at night . . ."

Then she had to confess that often now, instead of sleeping, she would have to get up and pace her room for hours because she could no longer breathe comfortably lying down.

Still, the doctor did not seem to be unduly alarmed.

"She'll be all right when she's been back to Nauheim," he said time and again. "These nervous symptoms will yield to treatment. Meanwhile, she must take the drops I've prescribed."

Therewith Steffen's fears would be allayed.

Of course he did not know that Brigitte had made the medical man promise to keep the truth from her

husband as long as possible. This doctor was her willing slave, and had joined in the conspiracy when she explained: "It is essential that Herr Tromholt should have no worry just now that might disturb the even flow of his thoughts. He must be spared any anxiety on my account."

When Steffen arrived to say good morning, he would find her slack after her exertions over her toilet, but she looked so sweet lying there among the cushions that were hardly whiter than herself, her fair hair neatly arranged for the day. If he scolded her playfully for being a vain little piece of goods, she would say:

"I must do something in the early morning hours. Besides, it is such a pleasure to be able to greet you all fresh and fine."

In spite of her growing weakness, she was still able to go out a little and do the shopping. A lift had been put into the house years ago, otherwise she could not have got about as much as she did, for the stairs were beyond her powers. She took pleasure in going to the market as she had done in the days of their poverty. She even insisted upon carrying the old oilcloth bag, Loni going with her now to relieve her of the burden when it was full.

Save for these foraging expeditions, Brigitte did not leave the house. But she was all the more insistent that Steffen should seek distraction outside.

"There's Astrid for a companion nowadays," she said. "You can't make the old excuse that there's

no one to gad about with. And we're not so frightfully short of money any longer. So into your dinner-jacket, and off you go!"

Astrid had regular evening parties where he was always made welcome. Indeed, if he were to believe the two women, these gatherings were organised solely on his account. So Brigitte insisted that he was in honour bound to attend them.

Races and languages were intermingled on these occasions. Fashionable and beautiful women—or, at least, would-be beautiful women—and men versed in mundane life and worldly wisdom; these were the elements of the new society which had conquered Berlin since the war. Diplomatists and foreign financiers were there in plenty; but of artists, very few. Precisely what he required! For thus no shade of suspicion could fall upon his connection with Astrid, and his silvery locks were, in conjunction with his fame (which most of the guests accepted on credit), an added ornament to her drawing-room.

The women behaved as if their main object in life was to have a love affair with him or any other convenient male; but Steffen soon came to the conclusion that an almost automatic impulse, a quasi-professional coquetry, underlay these advances. He recollected that it had ever been thus in the great world; only he had forgotten, because for so long he had been shut off from society life. He had become sobered and respectable; hence his surprise.

But he soon found his depth again; for he, too,

could assume a light tone; he, too, was a master at innuendo. And Astrid, who had watched him anxiously at first, felt that she was amply rewarded for all her pains.

Nevertheless, however happy he might seem, when eleven o'clock drew near he would become restless; by the time half-past-eleven struck no dark-rimmed eyes or belladonna-enlarged pupils were capable of holding him away from home.

He knew that Brigitte would never be able to fall asleep until his return; and every hour that he robbed her of the necessary repose was an added injury to her health.

Once arrived before the house, he would glance up at her windows to see if they were still alight; and often he would pause to ask himself: "Supposing I came home one night and found them dark?"

Then he would rally himself, saying: "You've got her still, Steffen, my man." And with this thought, content would again enter his heart.

He found her lying in bed, a smile lighting up her features, eager to hear his news.

All these men and women, human beings such as she had never known, post-war society, became living realities to her under his animated descriptions. Even as he spoke, stories would shape themselves in her mind, taking these people as heroes and heroines. Sometimes, unable to sleep, she would spend the whole night weaving her tales around them.

To add to her pleasure, he would embroider a

little, telling her of this lovely young damsel or the other who had succumbed to his charms. Brigitte beamed her satisfaction.

Especially necessary was it to hoax her in this way if he had just returned after an hour of love intimacy. Seldom, indeed, did he permit himself such relaxation, for his anxiety on Brigitte's account was too sincere to allow him much freedom. Astrid, likewise, had been infected with a similar anxiety. So the two lovers spent most of their private time together in pouring their hearts out to one another, and talking about "our" Brigitte.

Thus, whether they spent the evening in converse, or, perhaps, had fallen into a doze, they were so concerned not to miss the hour when they ought to part, that Vibeke (who had long since been let into the secret) would, as ordered, knock at the door as soon as eleven o'clock struck—for Steffen had made it a rule never to get home later than midnight.

On such evenings he would have to draw entirely upon his resourceful imagination to account to Brigitte for his absence. And always she believed him blindly.

Thus in course of time the spring came flooding the land again; and with the spring, hope, the perennial deceiver, awoke in the Tromholt household too.

The morning sunshine streamed in at Brigitte's windows and made a pathway over her bed; snowdrops filled every vase; and, when the windows were

open, she could hear the shrill carol of the lark coming to her from the nearby countryside.

Then, one April morning, just as she and Steffen were about to sit down to breakfast, Brigitte had an agonising heart-attack. He and Loni carried her back to bed; and as she looked up at him he saw once more that imploring, doglike expression in her eyes, the expression he had witnessed more than once during the years they had lived together, which arose out of bitter need, and conveyed implicit confidence in his ability to bring relief. Though as a rule she was loath to call in medical aid, this time she never ceased crying: "The doctor! Fetch the doctor! I must see the doctor!"

Luckily he was at home when Steffen rang him up, and within a quarter of an hour was at her bedside. He gave her a morphine injection, and she soon sank into a state between sleep and waking.

But the doctor looked grave. He could no longer hide the condition of affairs from the husband. Before taking his departure, he said to Steffen:

"We must be prepared for all eventualities."

Two days and two nights she lay, her senses dulled by morphine. Then, against all expectations, she rallied.

"I hope the worst is over," said the doctor.

The nurse, a practised hand, confirmed the impression; but Steffen, who wanted greater security, demanded a consultation with a famous specialist.

The great man came; he proved to be a simple

and gruff old gentleman, who carried his celebrity with a jaunty air, as if he could not understand why chance should have so favoured him.

A lengthy examination followed. Then he had an almost equally lengthy talk with the family doctor. Ultimately, he asked to see Steffen again.

"I fancy we shall be able to keep her for you a little while yet," he said. "But she'll need a lot of care. No excitement. She must be allowed to live in a kind of dream. Couldn't you get away with her to the Italian lakes? It is warm and summery there already. Or you may know of other possibilities. Some place where she will not only enjoy rest for her body, but which will likewise bring peace to her mind—for it strikes me that she lives at too high a tension."

No sooner were the doctors gone than he went to her and stood by her bedside. She smiled up at him, saying:

"Thank goodness it's nothing serious. You don't need to worry, dear."

How easy it was to deceive her!

She immediately set to work making plans. He had to bring several volumes of Baedeker for her to study; soon the bed was laden with travel literature. It was so long since they had been in the south. Her heart was filled to overflowing with the joyous prospect of visiting Italy anew. Locarno, first of all; and a dream steamer was already conveying her to Pallanza and the Borromeo Islands . . .

Then came a relapse. She was again at death's door.

One day she begged to be allowed to see Loni's boy, it was so long since she had been able to visit him.

Steffen objected that if the lad was to be brought here, the secret of Loni's motherhood must out. But Brigitte pressed her point.

"Oh, do let me see him, please! He is my grandson."

So Steffen went off, and brought the child himself to the house by the private stair leading to the studio. She had him beside her on the bed, pushed his fair hair from his angular forehead, and gazed her fill on the youthful face, seemingly in search of something.

Steffen knew what she sought.

After a while, on some pretext or the other, Loni was asked to come to the sick room. Then there was no end to the joyful clamour, until Brigitte lay back exhausted among the pillows.

The mother vanished, taking her son with her; and when Brigitte was sufficiently recovered to speak, she said to Steffen:

"You will always be good to him, won't you? He is my own flesh and blood."

Since promises were in the air, she now came to more important demands.

"And you will also be good to Atta, even if she does belong to a stranger. And to Leo too, you'll

be kind, won't you, because he is making her happy and because he has suffered so much during the war?"

Yes, yes; he promised everything. Her thoughts wandered to all those whom she loved; but except for Susi, who had wilfully cut herself adrift, and for her own sister, alone and out of reach in East Prussia, she could think of no one.

For he, and he alone, had been everything to her in life, its content and its substance.

And all of a sudden her lips were twisted with that sad and bitter smile he knew so well. It was her only weapon of defence against his disdain or his anger. Ah, but surely this smile was not the one he knew. Never before had it expressed so heart-rending a grief; never!

"Oh, what is it, dear?" Steffen asked in broken tones.

Slowly, drop by drop as it were, the words fell from her lips:

"When I—am—gone—you will—marry another—and—we both—know—who it—will—be."

At first he could think of one thing only, of the words she had once spoken about his being so safe with Astrid. But almost at once it became clear to him that in her heart of hearts she felt no peace at the prospect; on the contrary, she was racked with sorrow at the thought of leaving him to the tender cares of a more fortunate woman than herself.

For this reason he protested with more than common vigour against her suggestion, assuming the atti-

tude that something inordinate was being demanded of him.

Brigitte did not answer; but that poignant smile lingered on her face; whereupon his grief assumed such giant proportions that it was borne in upon him with unutterable conviction how hopeless would be life without her to participate. How could he bear to live without her? How was it possible to live without her? He asked these questions again and again. She was the core and substance of his being. She was the very breath of his life.

"Don't leave me yet," he cried in his anguish. "Don't leave me yet! Not till I have done my job; not till I have finished *The Deluge*. Then we can both leave this world, together."

She looked at him with uncomprehending eyes, unable to utter a word. But at last her smile changed to one of peaceful tenderness; then it disappeared altogether.

She might not believe all he said, but he had succeeded in tranquillising her.

One thing caused her infinite pain in the days that followed: Astrid never came to see her. Not that Brigitte minded on her own account; she asked nothing for herself. But since he never left the house it was his friend's duty to come and look him up.

Brigitte was honestly outraged by Astrid's neglect; and she was at no pains to hide her vexation from Steffen.

He dared not tell her that he himself was respon-

sible for Astrid's apparent remissness, fearful as he was of anything that might cause undue excitement. All he said was:

"She'll come soon."

Nor did he fail to let Astrid know how much a visit would be appreciated.

That very evening she presented herself at Brigitte's bedside.

Steffen remained in his own bedroom, to be close at hand in an emergency.

Through the door he heard them joking and laughing, just as they had often done in happier days, and care seemed to have fled. He and the two women were three by themselves once more, in the companionship which had brought happiness to them all, even though he now stood a little apart, listening anxiously.

In a quarter of an hour, there came a knock at the door.

"She has sent me to fetch you," said Astrid, adding in lower tones: "I think she's getting very tired."

There she lay, with the spray of lilies Astrid had brought lying on the counterpane. She looked at him cheerfully, and tried to raise her hand towards him, but was not strong enough.

"Astrid wants to go away," she said piteously. "Tell her to stay."

"She'll come back again soon," he answered consolingly, while thinking: "Thank goodness, they have not been talking about the future!"

Astrid laughed brightly as she bade farewell. Then, in silence, she and Steffen walked down the long passage towards the front door.

Nor did she utter a word as she clasped his hand in farewell. He saw that her eyes were brimming with tears.

Next day Brigitte had a new plan. She threw the Baedekers aside, saying:

"Look here, I don't want to go to the Italian lakes again. I want something quite different. The same wish comes back to me night after night. I suppose I can do whatever I like best?"

"What's the great idea, darling?"

With a deep sigh, she answered:

"I should so like to see Neuheide once more."

He mused for a moment; and then:

"I think it can be managed."

"But not to the house!" Brigitte exclaimed. "Nor yet the park! They belong to the new dynasty. People of our sort can only peep over the hedge. But I should so like to go to the gamekeeper's lodge. I want to lie on the grey moss once more, just as I did when Atta's pram stood close at hand; want to see the squirrels chasing one another up and down the trees; want to hear the magpies chattering."

"Strange," he thought, recalling Atta's secret manœuvres and Susi's farewell wish. "This little spot of earth is more to every one of them than all my magic arts!" Well, it was easy to ring up Neuheide.

"Yes, Herr Tromholt; it's Piefke speaking," came

the answer through the telephone. "What can I do for you? Are the panels ready? When are you going to send 'em?"

"They're ready, and I should like to bring them myself, to see to the placing of them, so that I can be personally satisfied they're in the best possible light."

"That's splendid. When may I expect you down?"

"But there's one thing more I should like to explain," interposed Steffen, "I want to bring my wife along with me. Could you manage to let us have the use of the gamekeeper's lodge for a day or two? We don't wish to make ourselves a nuisance up at the house."

"My dear Sir, you wouldn't be a nuisance to me here. Anything but! Still, of course you can do whatever you like best. Whoever's at the lodge now shall be given the chuck instanter."

Thus had Steffen pledged himself to the fulfilment of Brigitte's longing.

By day and by night, waking or asleep, she lived only in the expectation of a visit to the lost paradise.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

And, one morning, Brigitte died.

On rising, Steffen did not, as was customary with him, knock at her door; every hour of sleep she could get was a boon. Besides, the night-nurse was on duty.

The May sunshine lured him from the house even before he had taken his paint brushes in hand; and, since the ground was bright with flowers, his feet led him farther and farther afield. An hour and a half later he slipped his latchkey into the lock and was once more at home.

Loni met him, the tears streaming down her cheeks; Augusta was weeping noisily in the kitchen; even the nurse was crying.

He did not need to ask any questions; he rushed by them all, and made for Brigitte's bedroom.

She lay, still warm, as if asleep; eyes closed, and hands folded peacefully on her breast.

"Nonsense!" That was all he found to say.

Yet when he made to embrace her, her body flopped over sideways, and he had to put it to rights again.

"So this is death? That's how it is when one is dead," he thought.

The word beat rhythmically on his ears: Dead, dead, dead; an incessant and persistent refrain.

But he could not grasp its significance. The idea caused him hardly any sorrow.

A hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned; it was the nurse. She was telling him how things had happened.

The night had been a peaceful one. Her patient had slept comfortably. Early that morning, she had gone to freshen herself up after her vigil. When she brought up breakfast at eight and pulled back the curtains, the invalid was still half asleep, so she took the tray away, thinking a little more rest would do no harm. Half an hour later she came back; receiving no answer to her enquiry, she went close up to the bed, and . . .

Yes, all was over. The doctor who lived next door had been summoned in the emergency, and within a quarter of an hour the family man had joined him. Both had said it was "embolism"; one of the quickest and easiest deaths imaginable; she had probably passed away in her sleep.

Whether Loni or the nurse was responsible for placing all those flowers on the bedside table seemed to him a matter of indifference; but that they were there filled him with a poignant emotion, as if something very important had been accomplished.

He did not reproach himself for having gone for a walk. Quite otherwise! The general upset, weeping servants and preoccupied physicians, would merely have robbed him of his mood of pensive recollection.

Self-reproach came later; much later.

Now he had to be alert and active.

One more look at the dear face; one more kiss on the soft lips ere they should grow cold: then—to work!

A telegram had been sent to Atta a fortnight ago, warning her that Mummy was far from well. "Come soon, if you possibly can." Her answer had been: "Expect us both."

While awaiting their arrival, it was he who must attend to the preparations for the funeral.

He did not know Susi's address. Atta would have to let her know. In any case she could not cross the Atlantic in time.

"To work, old man! No time to spare for mourning your loss."

Off into town: coffin, lying-in-state, candles, flowers, cemetery, priest, and the Lord knows what else besides.

Always on the go. Even the luncheon he ate in some chance restaurant tasted quite good. Strange that lunch should be palatable on such a day as this!

Twice in the course of his peregrinations he passed Astrid's door.

"It would be an affront to my dead if I went in," he thought.

That he was guilty of an affront to Astrid, never entered his head.

When, towards nightfall, he got back home, he said to himself:

"I suppose she will still be dead."

Yet deep down in the abysses of his consciousness was the hope:

"Maybe, after all, she has awakened again."

Ah, no! She was still dead; more dead even than she had been in the morning.

Her cheeks were pale as the winter snows, and her limbs were rigid and hard to the touch.

She had been dressed for her everlasting sleep while he had been away, and the men who had brought the coffin were waiting about to know where they should set up the catafalque.

He led them to the studio. The outside stairway was broad enough to make the carrying down of the coffin easy. But that was for later . . .

She would lie at peace here, in the place she had loved best of all, surrounded by his pictures as by a host of faithful warriors—faithful to her who had been their trusty guardian. By putting all the easels away in the cupboard, room could be made here for the funeral ceremony, and there would be no need for people to assemble in some uncongenial and unfamiliar chapel.

As soon as her remains were installed, he set to work to inform his friends by telegram. To speak to them over the phone seemed to him impossible; his voice would betray his emotion, and that would be intolerable. He might actually have broken down and wept! Till now—and he was proud of the fact—he had shed no tear.

Astrid, too, received her wire in due course, just as if she were of no more account than all the others. Yet she was the last remaining link he had with this world . . .

Until Atta should arrive!

But Atta would soon be going away again, back to a far-off land; and then he would be quite alone.

That night he slept deeply and dreamlessly. When he awoke in the morning, his first thought was:

"Something unpleasant has happened. I wonder what it can be."

Then, with remembrance, came horror:

"It cannot be! What absolute idiocy!"

He sprang out of bed and rushed up the studio stairs in his night-gear. A man must convince himself of the truth!

Yes, there she lay. Just as when he had last seen her overnight, only that now a truant beam of sunlight was slanting across her cheek.

"You must make a picture of her," he said to himself. "It's the only thing that remains for you to do—for her sake—and for your own . . ."

The thought crossed his mind that she had not sat for him since . . . Ah, that was an inconceivable while back! So many strangers had carried away mementoes of a happy hour or two in his company; but she, to whom he owed such an infinite debt of gratitude, had always seemed too old, too unattractive, to be worth the trouble of a few strokes of the brush. And her personal demands had been too

modest for her to worry him with a request on her own behalf. This lack of appreciation had been in him from the first, and had even extended to include Atta . . .

In a little while his canvas was set up, and he had got his charcoal and other gear together.

He set to work. But with the first line he drew, his arm slackened, and his hand fell limply to his side.

"Buck up, old man," he cried indignantly; "what Titian and a host of other artists had the pluck to do, you must also be able to do, surely."

Again he started on his picture, and this time did not quail.

As he worked, she seemed to get younger and younger, she seemed to acquire greater beauty under his very eyes.

At first he thought he must be suffering from an illusion. Yet no, it really was so. This must be the "transfiguration after death" about which there was so much talk.

Yet no, again; it was not a transfiguration at all. She was her own self, just as she had been during her earthly pilgrimage, only she was thirty years of age once more, and had the darling little face of those days.

All at once, Astrid was standing behind him.

The door was closed to intruders, but of course she was an exception.

Indeed, he was so engrossed in his labours, that he

took no notice of his friend's presence. All he said was, as he wielded his brushes:

"Just look how lovely she is."

Astrid merely gazed at him as if he were demented; then she sank on her knees by the coffin, and buried her face in the pall.

"What a rarely beautiful pose," he thought. "A pity the group will never be committed to canvas."

Astrid rose and, in her grief, began to talk nonsense.

"I should never have lied to her. I ought to have told her all. I owed her that, at least."

"The first thing you owed her was not to disturb her peace of mind," said he, while his eyes travelled quickly from canvas to model and back to canvas again. "But please step aside, you are throwing a horrible shadow."

"Are you a human being," she cried in anguish, "that you can speak so heartlessly?"

"I haven't any time for ethical discussions. She changes from hour to hour. I must get it fixed, just as she is—for—I—shall never—see her—again."

As he spoke, he heard a mighty sound of singing in his ears, and the next thing he knew was that he was on earth again, with his head buried in Astrid's lap.

When, at her request, Loni brought him a cup of tea—he had quite forgotten to breakfast, and the servants had not dared disturb him—he soon recov-

ered his strength, bade Astrid go, and resumed his painting.

He worked unremittingly the whole day.

Towards six that evening Loni, trying to master her sobs, climbed the studio stairs to inform him that "Frau Konsul" had arrived.

"Have you told her?"

"No. When I opened the door and saw who it was I burst out crying, Sir; and as I didn't want her to see, I ran away up here."

Just as he was, his palette and paint brushes in his hands, he ran down to welcome his daughter.

There she stood, tall and stately, with her stern eyes, which could at times be so meltingly tender, staring at him and at fate.

She had but to look at him, and she knew what had happened. Her arms were round his neck, her face hidden in his shoulder, as she sobbed her heart out—just like that evening long ago in the park at Neuheide when she had clamoured for her Mummy. But Mummy could no longer come to her. He led Atta up to the studio; almost carried her—to her mother's side.

A quarter of an hour later her husband arrived. She had profited by his being absorbed in seeing after the luggage to slip away ahead of him: she had felt too anxious to wait till he was through.

"I'm sorry, children, you must forgive me," said Steffen, "but I really can't put you up. There's

heaps of room, I know—only I simply can't. Please find rooms at a hotel, as my guests, of course."

Atta assumed her high-priestess air, saying resolutely:

"Impossible, Daddy. Perhaps Leo may feel inclined to obey you—but I must stay with my Mummy."

He realised at once that he was asking too much of his child. His mind had been so obsessed with the thought that he must remain alone with his dead that it took him some time to get used to the idea of a third party having a claim on her likewise.

On him, too, as a matter of fact; but of that he did not dream for the nonce.

Now the funeral could take place; the speedier the better.

The last night when Brigitte's body would rest beneath his roof had come.

Steffen recalled the morning of his father's funeral. Getting up early, he had found his mother sitting by the coffin, gazing at her dead husband; he had called to her, but she had not taken her eyes away. She had sat thus the whole night through.

He meant to do likewise.

Since he had doubts of his power to persevere, and he did not wish to put constraint on himself for his night of mourning, he had the divan prepared so that, if necessary, he might lie down and rest.

The household went to bed.

Giving a radiance that was something between

moonlight and sunlight, the projector played upon her waxen visage.

"One more picture I'd like to have," he murmured.

Essential, it certainly was not. There were two completed portraits and innumerable sketches standing all around, each one a successful likeness, it would appear. But he wanted to make up for all he had neglected to do these many years past.

He set up a canvas on his easel, and half closed his eyes, seeking an advantageous angle.

Then he was aware of a strange, an uncanny sound, like the baying of a hound he had once heard when the poor creature had sprung foul of a stockade fencing. It was so wild, so appallingly animal in tone, that he was shaken to the soul.

What could it be? Gradually it dawned on him that the noise had emerged from his own throat.

As his hand moved in preparatory curves over the clean surface of the canvas, an inner voice was saying:

"Don't desecrate the last night with your senseless daubing. Otherwise it will have gone by for ever, and you will not have really lived through it."

Yes, he must be able to preserve all he could of these precious hours; that was what mattered.

He threw down the instruments of his craft, and began pacing the room. Round the laurels in their tubs, and round them again and again, now to the right about, now to the left, to get a glimpse of her renewed at every angle.

After to-morrow, for all eternity, he would see her face no more. Even if he were to be laid at her side—what would be the use? What the worthies called "common clay"—a figment of the imagination!

This endless wandering made him very tired.

He flung himself down on the couch just—to take a little journey to Copenhagen. Alone, for the first time, quite alone. No, not quite alone! For she lay over there. He need but rise on his elbow, and he could see her as she lay.

In the light of the projector, the shadows came and went; from time to time the apparatus made a purring or a hissing noise as of two spectral cats.

Soothing rather: one might well be lulled to sleep by the sound. And—he slept! He slept through the precious hours, to dream of howling dogs and spitting cats.

When he awoke, the morning light was streaming in through the tall windows.

The last day had dawned. The rising sun, which in the height of summer always paid his work-room an early morning visit, was shining on her for the last time. He, too, was looking at her for the last time.

Again he heard the uncanny call of the dog, and as the sound issued from his lips, he thought of the words he had uttered only a few weeks ago in response to her grievous smile. He had said: "We can both leave this world together."

God knows, he was not play-acting on that occasion—and yet it had been the expression of no more than a transient mood. To-day it seemed to him a commitment, a vow, an unavoidable destiny. "We can leave this world together."

Why not? The revolver was there, ready to hand; in the drawer of his bedside table; always ready.

But what about *The Deluge?* And the four panels must be fixed. And there was this to do and that. Duties to perform. Duties to himself; duties to her. For she participated in everything . . .

"When all is finished, dear, I shall follow you."

Armed with this resolution, he entered upon the most sorrowful day of his wedded life.

CHAPTER XXXIX

It was over at last!

All the letters of condolence had been answered, the bills had been paid. Aunt Pauline had gone back to her home—yes, Aunt Pauline, poor dear, wizened of face, had turned up unexpectedly on the morning of the funeral! Atta, too, was preparing to depart.

Atta; her child. Atta, Brigitte's legacy; like a shrine of the Blessed Virgin on the wayfarer's road! What was she actually to him? He hardly gave this a thought.

Whatever she did—weep on his shoulder, stare into a future where there would be no longer any Mummy to appeal to—always she was a true daughter of her mother, gentle, loving, and guileless.

Her husband treated her as if she were a star fallen from heaven; and in return she devoted herself to him with the unstinted self-sacrifice that had been so characteristic of her mother's behaviour towards her father. Thus Atta's life was full of other duties, and, however great her fondness for her father, she did not need him any more.

If he were perfectly honest with himself, he could not but admit that he, too, no longer needed Atta.

He wanted to be alone with his dead.

In fact, when Atta, sheltered in the arms of the man to whom she belonged, waved a tear-drenched handkerchief from the window of the departing train, he heaved a sigh of relief.

The glass wall, which had for weeks shut him away from the world and from his fellow mortals, closed tighter than ever around him.

This glass wall, indeed! A symbol, of course, and an exaggerated symbol at that. But with what admirable precision did it reflect the way in which he lived each present day.

People flocked round him, pressing in upon him, wishing to get in touch with him: but they were never successful. Voices spoke to him, friendly words were wafted towards him: he heard them well enough, but as if they came from a very great distance, and as if they were not intended for his ears.

These would-be participators in his existence were, for him, bodiless and soulless creatures. Something invisible stood between him and them, thick as a wall, indestructible; nowhere was there a cleft through which one could slip.

His wall of glass!

An old friend came to see him, a lady with whom he had formerly had ardent relations. That was many years ago now. It had been one of those casual love affairs which grow out of friendship and lapse on to the friendly plane once more as soon as passion is sated.

The lady came, hoping to comfort him. Who can tell what other motives called her to his side? Is a woman's heart so easy to penetrate?

She sat with him now, pouring out tea; she petted him fondly, and held his hand.

"Ah, if only you had an inkling . . ." he thought as she took leave of him. How happy he was when she had gone!

Came a colleague of his, a member of the committee of the Artists' Society. Oh, friends of this sort he had a-many, though they have played little part in this book.

The visitor sat puffing away at his cigar, and clapping Steffen on the shoulder, said blusteringly:

"Pull yourself together, old chap. One's left when the other's taken. That's the way it always happens."

Steffen gripped his thighs, to keep his hands still, thinking the while:

"I should like to strangle you, you damned fool."

Loni cared for him, of course.

She glided invisibly through the house. The table was laid for him; his bed was made in the morning, and turned down in the evening; his paint brushes were cleaned; visitors were kept at bay; the telephone was disconnected. Everything necessary for his comfort was done, without his having to trouble about the matter. Then, one day, she came to him, twisting a bunch of keys in her hand; she wanted to speak, but seemed afraid.

"You are changed in some way, child."

"Don't know what it can be, Sir."

Then he realised that it was because she was in mourning. So some one wore mourning besides himself. Was any one else entitled to? Atta, of course; but she was far away, on a distant isle.

"Well, what d'you want?"

"Oh, Sir, it's about the housekeeping. Now that Mistress is gone . . ."

She burst into tears.

It took a good while before he could find out what she wanted. She was only a servant-maid, and she could not manage to keep accounts. Would not Master get a lady to look after the house? Some one she could hand over the account books to? Some one who would see cook and order dinner, for Master would really starve if he never had anything to eat except cutlets and beefsteaks day in and day out.

Her tear-stained face was lit up by a rueful smile.

"Run away with you, child," he said. "I'll give you all the money you need for the housekeeping; but if you ever say another word to me about getting a lady in to look after things, I'll pack you off by the next train to your beloved Munich. D'you understand?"

She understood well enough; and, with mingled zeal and caution, she took the burden of the housekeeping on to her inexperienced shoulders.

Everything ran on wheels. It was almost as if "Mistress" were still alive. He saw practically

nothing of Loni, or at any rate never noticed her, except when funds ran out. Then she would tremblingly plant herself in his way, and had to be reassured by being told that she was "quite a good sort of girl," as far as expenditure was concerned.

He was always pleased to see her, but forgot her instantly when she was out of sight.

That glass wall was round him in his own house, too. There was, perhaps, one person who might have thrust it aside, but she kept away from him as if suffering from a sense of guilt; and he was afraid to try and break the spell which had imposed a sort of paralysis on him.

The last time he had seen her had been at the funeral. The eyes burning in her pallid face had conveyed a painful message of imperious complicity. But this was only for the fraction of a second; and then she had vanished like a spectre in the black-clad assembly.

He received a letter from her after a while:

"I take it that you understand why I am keeping away. I intend to continue in this until you give me a sign. You may rest assured that, though we do not meet, all my thoughts and good wishes go out to you every moment of the day."

Thoughts? Wishes? Were there such things still on this earth?

Some time elapsed; then came a second missive:

"I feel that you are going through a worse time than do most men who have lost her whom they

loved better than anything else in the world, and I should be so very, very happy if you would allow me to give what help I can, so that you may find it easier to bear your trouble. Your sorrow is, in truth, my sorrow too. If you would rather I did not come and look you up in your own house, don't fail to knock at my door, if not for your own sake, then, at least, for mine; it may be that I am suffering no less than you."

The pretence of being dead was shattered, and he felt that it would be unmanly to shroud himself in silence any longer. He rated himself, saying:

"What a superlative fool you are, Steffen, my boy. The most exquisite young woman in the world is yours for the claiming, and you thrust her away and will have none of her. For what reason? Sheer cowardice, I expect."

On an afternoon in June, when the air was full of the scent of fading lilac and newly blossoming acacia, he stood once more at Astrid's door.

Vibeke opened to him. She was dressed in black; Loni, too, had gone into mourning. The fact annoyed him. Over-zealous, these underlings!

But Astrid was wearing a white dress, the only sign of recent bereavement being a black band at her waist. She had not wanted to flaunt gay colours on this, his first, visit.

Tall and slim, she stood before him, her body the very perfection of feminine grace and beauty, reflecting a mind no less perfect; for all she suffered and

all she did, all she concealed and all she revealed, showed her to be high-minded and generous, a woman to whom one could appeal in days of affliction, whom one could take by the hand, saying: "Save me from myself."

Yet somewhere in the shadows of this room decked with flowers there lurked a ghostly smile, bitter-sweet and sad, a smile that was heart-rending in its woful appeal. In the silence of this first encounter, when each seemed to be awaiting the word that would break the spell, a whisper came to his ear: "When I—am—gone . . ."

Now she was gone, she who had spoiled so many decades of his life, the fetter that had hampered his movements in the galley-slave torture of an undesired marriage; the way was clear at last for him, an elderly man; he was free to go forward, and to take this young, this beautiful young creature for his own, and . . .

Well? And—what?

Nothing! True, he laid his hand in hers; true, he drew her to him and embraced her; true, the old tie seemed to have been restored, and a happier, freer life to loom before him. But it was all play-acting; deeds done against his will, under stress of a necessity imposed from without. The core of his existence had no concern with these shadows in an unreal outer world.

Astrid led him to the tea table, where lilies and silver vied with one another in radiance; she pushed

silken cushions behind him; she stroked his rebellious hair, very gently, very lightly, and suddenly refrained as if she feared to be a nuisance.

"Brigitte's hand was lighter when she caressed me," he thought. "And how often she, too, withdrew—because I had made her anxious and full of fear."

Oh, to break this silence!

But how? His mind was a blank; he was tongue-tied.

'Twas Astrid who started speaking.

"I have often awaited your coming, just as I have been waiting for you to-day, for I thought: 'In the end he is bound to come.' I cannot penetrate to the depths of your soul and read your intentions—but you have been wrong not to come before. You know as well as I that I would never try to rob you of your sorrow. It is sacred to me, as it is to you. I know that she would rejoice in your being here now; I can see the smile of approval, her very own, like no one else's on earth."

"Do you still consider you should have told her all?"

His voice was rough and harsh; she shook her head dubiously, saying:

"In the early stages of grief one very easily believes that in some way or other one is responsible for the tragedy; so that love is apt to turn into self-reproach. I once knew a woman who nearly died under stress of such a feeling, tortured by the re-

gret that she had not put enough sugar in her husband's tea—hence his demise! I have more grounds for self-reproach than this poor thing, for I broke in on Brigitte's life, a veritable thief."

"You robbed her of nothing. Quite otherwise. You gave her—gave us—the one happy year we had during our life together."

"That may be true or not, and I may have earned your words of praise—I don't know. But it does not alter the fact that I shamelessly deceived her. If in the first throes of grief at her loss I regretted not having been perfectly frank with her, you must try to understand, or at least to forgive . . ."

"I have nothing to forgive. I have nothing but gratitude, and I thank you for all you've done, both in my own behalf and in her name. I thank you from the depths of my heart."

She said nothing; but when she looked into his eyes, he was alarmed and perplexed at the inward tension they betrayed. He tried to lead the conversation into less dangerous paths, by asking:

"And how are you getting on? Doing any work?"

She shrugged her shoulders, while at the corners of her mouth those terrible lines reappeared, the lines that had been graven by suffering after the frustration of her early love.

He had not seen this sign of sorrow in her face for a long while now; and he could not help feeling, with a shudder, that he was the culprit who had brought it back.

Then, as if to make him forget her momentary self-disclosure, she burst into a lively description of all she had been doing in recent weeks.

"Of course I've not been able to take much pleasure in these goings on. It seems an idiotic way of spending one's precious time. But I dare not draw back just now. I should lose all I have gained, and no longer have the possibilities of distraction to offer you when you resume a normal life—for you'll have to in the end, and will take pleasure in it all once more."

He laughed stridently at the idea. Blasphemy! To think he would ever go splashing about in those shallows again!

She looked at him sorrowfully, and questioningly, but was careful not to refer to the matter a second time.

To change the subject, they spoke of their plans for the summer.

He was going to Neuheide to see about the fixing of the panels. The excursion had been arranged on Brigitte's account, but he could not very well get out of it now. Anyway, he meant to stick to his job and not be lured from the house by the warm summer sunshine.

"Well, if you really have no plans of your own," said Astrid, "why not come for a day or two—still better, for a few weeks—to my place? I'll see that the conventions are suitably provided for, shall have some other guests at the same time so as to stop

gossiping tongues in the neighbourhood—and here. How does it strike you?"

Those days last summer rose visibly before him. The pale-gold sand, the dappled shade, the blue expanse of the waters, and the red clouds forming a canopy over all. Then another vision: a cosy-corner in the twilight, closed in by the greenish walls of a threefold screen, and a well-known voice saying softly and enticingly: "Shall we take a little journey to Copenhagen?"

"Thank you, dear," he said at last. "I know how kindly your invitation is meant, but I'm afraid I can't fall in with the suggestion."

She looked through him to a vision beyond, and bowed her head in acquiescence. Then she drew herself up as if she had come to a sudden determination; a smile fluttered in her eyes, a smile that was a mixture of grief and scorn and a sense of superiority.

"You are mistaken, friend," said she, "if you fancy you must guard yourself against my making claims on you."

"What claims?"

"Let me have my say. You know that the charm of our relationship, the reason for its stability, is precisely this fact: we have never made any claims on one another. I felt free, just as you did. I could only consent to take part in your life provided that I could carry on my own independently of you. We must not change these conditions. We both know

that, at the present moment, nothing is so alien to our thoughts as the idea of establishing claims on one another. For my part, that one experience of marriage has been enough to suffice me a lifetime. I shall never try to repeat the experiment. You, my poor dear, have lost something which is absolutely irreplaceable. If you have been forming plans of that sort for the future—I trust you will never do anything so mad as to imagine such a relationship can be repeated a second time—you would suffer a terrible disappointment, and only two ways out would be possible: either you would run away; or else . . . Do you now understand what I mean by 'making claims'? It is written on the tablets of destiny that there shall be neither tacit nor manifest claims between us two. Can you not now look me more squarely in the face? And when I tell you that I am leaving shortly, for the remainder of the summer, and ask you again to spend the time with me, there is no need for you to feel you must decline my invitation, I assure you."

His head felt hot; a shiver went through his body; he seemed to himself a poor, miserable creature. Yet at the same time a weight fell from his shoulders, a weight which had, consciously or unconsciously, been pressing him to the ground.

"It is splendid of you, Astrid, to have the courage to clear up matters between us. You are so absolutely right in everything you have said. Things

must be just as you say they ought to be. If you can still feel some affection for me in the future, I shall be grateful for any crumb you may choose to throw me."

Her eyes darkened and were blinded with tears, her lips trembled. She rose, and offered him her hand, saying, as she glanced at the clock:

"I'm sorry, but I must be going now; I've an engagement for the evening. But you'll come and see me again soon, won't you?"

"Whenever you like," he answered. "There is no one at home, now, whom I need consider . . ."

And, with the thought, he was yearning to be prisoned, as of old, within confining walls against which he had ever hotly rebelled.

Nearly a week went by before they saw each other again. They had had a few words over the telephone two or three times, had asked how work was progressing, told one another to keep cheerful, wished one another good night. Then Astrid rang up and invited him to spend the next evening with her.

He was not particularly pleased at having to accept, and yet as the hour drew near he was aware of a modicum of excitement.

The summer was at its height. Night had hardly fallen. Red roses hung in clusters from many walls. Love was in the air. One drank it in at every breath. It permeated every pore of the passion-fraught body.

Vibeke was awaiting him at the door, for eight

o'clock had already struck. She greeted him with a smile which to him, in his strained mood, seemed full of boding.

Astrid's reception of him was grave and reserved, as if he were a stranger. He was grateful, for he felt uneasy at the prospect of demonstrations of affection.

To-day she had not deliberately avoided wearing colours. Her dress was of some flimsy material, stamped with large blue flowers, and falling loosely to just below the knee. She was once more the Greek girl he had met so long ago.

"How lovely she is," he thought, as he looked her comely body up and down with an approving eye. But in the twilit background he saw a matronly form arise, an unwieldy shape, kept trim by steel and whalebone.

Oh, how dearly he loved that matron's figure! . . .

Vibeke drew aside the curtain that screened the dining-room, and the place where the two friends stood was flooded with golden light. The electric chandelier which usually illumined Astrid's parties was not lighted to-night; but the copper brackets round the walls suffused the room with a mellow sheen.

In the midst of this effulgence stood the table, already laid for the evening meal.

Red roses in silver vases, and more red roses strewn upon the white table-cloth. Garlands of roses

linking those in the vases with those on the cloth. As one took one's place it seemed as if one were diving into a sea of roses.

While giving vent to his admiration, Steffen was thinking: "We often had the table decorated like this in Neuheide when She herself had arranged the flowers."

And again: "The rose we had in a pot that night her son went off to his death—that was red too."

The meal was being served. Danish dishes to-night. Eel soup, such as may be eaten in Hamburg. Astrid's dinners were always excellent.

Each course seemed better than the one before, and, to crown all, "Jordbaer med Floede," although strawberries were no longer in season. He wondered how she had been able to procure them, and this generous supply of cream—only at Neuheide were such quantities to be found.

As the meal progressed, a feeling of comfortable relaxation spread through his body and limbs. He had not experienced so pleasurable a sensation for many a weary day, though even now it was interrupted from time to time by a shiver of uneasiness.

The two friends spoke little. It seemed as if she would fain give him time to get accustomed to her again. The companionship which appeared to be taking birth this evening was far more important, she thought, than anything they had experienced together in days gone by.

Here were provided those things he most lacked:

tenderness, understanding, devotion—not the infinitely passive devotion Brigitte had given him from the outset, but, rather, a free and proud and active lavishing of self which safeguarded the liberty and pride both of her who gave and of him who received. Here he might find rest from grieving, perhaps even a sorrow-fraught oblivion, which would not imply faithlessness (never that!) but would restore to his life the savour that it lacked.

Tentatively, questioningly, they sought and avoided one another's eyes, and a smile of anticipation hovered about their lips.

When they rose from table, Astrid said:

"Let's have coffee on the balcony overlooking the garden; it is dark and quiet there."

She laid her hand in his arm, and led him through a room at the back of the flat.

He had scarcely ever been here before. Ivy, growing in boxes, had been trained to form a little arbour amid the multitude of stone-walled houses, and a little oasis of greenery spread away at their feet.

A blackbird piped fitfully from the bushes, standing sentinel maybe against marauding cats; while from a distant garden the song of a nightingale fell softly on the ear, a melody full of infinite yearning as it fluted forth into the night.

Vibeke brought the tray with coffee and cigarettes. Then she discreetly vanished. Light glowed fitfully

in the darkness as the two friends smoked in silence, illuminating faintly mouth, cheeks, and eyes.

Thus, from time to time, he could scan her face; and each time he looked he saw the same sorrowful and imperious expression which she had worn when, like a spectre, she had flitted past him at Brigitte's funeral.

His thoughts wandered from the funeral to that night when, watching by the lifeless corpse, he had heard so strange a cry issuing from his own throat. Ah, he must flee away from this sound, farther and ever farther away . . .

"When I am gone . . ." those were her words.

But a voice within him cried aloud:

"You are not gone. You are here, near me; and you will remain near me till the end of time."

What profited it him that love was in the air, vibrant and glowing, penetrating his very heart? That love flowed agonisingly through his veins?

"When I am gone! When I am gone!"

Astrid's voice came to him from the darkness:

"Won't you have a little more coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"See here, my dear. I would give anything to drag you away from your thoughts; but I no longer know how to begin. You don't answer when I speak to you. I'm afraid you are digging yourself into an entrenchment of feelings, are burying yourself in a pit from which you will find it hard to escape."

"Perhaps you're right, Astrid; but what can I do to prevent it?"

"You can go about a bit, seek companionship, look up old friends. You might . . ." the rest of the sentence stuck in her throat.

He completed her thought in the stillness of his own heart:

". . . take delight with your beloved."

Aloud he said:

"One can always work, and that's what I'm doing now and mean to go on doing. My glass wall cannot prevail against that!"

"'Glass wall'?" murmured Astrid, wonderingly. "I don't understand."

He told her about his strange fancy, and how he felt the wall gradually closing round him.

"Even now, and here?"

"Even now, and here," he answered, unthinkingly, not realising the unspeakable cruelty of the words.

Astrid held her peace and sat very still. Many minutes went by. Then she got up, and walked slowly through the darkened room which gave on to the balcony. A door softly closed.

How long Steffen sat there all alone, he did not know. An eternity, so he thought.

At last a feeling of anxiety brought him to his feet. He followed where she had disappeared, along the dimly lighted passage, by the door of the kitchen where the maids were chatting and laughing, on into the dining-room . . .

Everywhere it was dark and empty. Nor did he find her in the sitting-room.

He pushed open the bedroom door. In the light of the reading lamp, he found her kneeling by the bed on which, often and often, he had lain beside her, clasped in her loving embrace, and where now, her face pressed into the pillows, she lay sobbing as if her heart would break, while her whole body was shaken with the violence of her grief.

Steffen stepped up behind her and flung his arms around her, endeavouring to raise her head; but she pressed her face all the more resolutely into the pillows.

Never had he known her lose self-control so completely as at this moment.

Slowly, at length, she yielded to his touch. He sat on the edge of the bed, and she, still kneeling, pillowed her head on his knee. Her sobs became less violent, and, by slow degrees, a sense of appeasement came to them both.

"You must not stay kneeling like this, my dear," he said at length. "Try to get up."

Half lifting her, he led her to the divan which was at the foot of the bed; and when he begged of her to lie down, she obediently did his bidding.

"Do forgive me. I'm so sorry," she whispered, with her eyes closed. "I don't usually give way like this . . . But it's done me good. Since I saw her lying in her coffin, I haven't shed a tear. Now—I

—am—very tired . . . I feel sleepy . . . I think I could get a little sleep . . ."

He made as if to go; whereupon, she:

"No, no; please stay with me. Fetch a chair, and sit near by . . . If you would just lay your hand on my forehead—it would make me feel better."

Steffen did everything she wished, and was pleased to notice how her agitated breathing quieted down, her limbs relaxed, and soon she was asleep.

He withdrew his hand, and looked down at her.

The shaded lamp sent a soft yellow glow over her as she lay.

Her head pillowed on her arm, she looked for all the world like the Giorgione Venus, and his fingers itched for paints and brushes so as to fix the picture on canvas.

Then, imperceptibly, she suffered a change, was no longer herself, had become Brigitte, the Brigitte who had slumbered, fresh and young, by his side so long ago.

True, there was no physical resemblance between the two women. Brigitte's features had never been so imperious and regular as these; Brigitte's fair, straight tresses had curled only when constrained by art, whereas Astrid's dark locks waved regally and naturally from her austere brow.

And yet the creature lying here was something more than Brigitte's counterpart, she was Brigitte's completion, Brigitte's fulfilment. Astrid, giving

him her body and her soul, had dowered him with things that had always been lacking in Brigitte; with things Brigitte had lost through the oncoming of middle age, through the unshapeliness to which she had fallen a prey; with things Brigitte lacked because he, Steffen, had stunted her mental growth. Astrid had restored to him the freedom of which he had been robbed by marriage.

It was for this reason that he had loved Astrid, and had been happy with her—and not with her alone, but with Brigitte too, since now for the first time, when he had come to possess all that he had blamed Brigitte for depriving him of, did he realise how indispensable she had really been to him.

One year of happiness; one year out of so many.

The year had flown by, and no amount of self-deception, no effort of the imagination, could ever bring it back again out of the void.

In very truth, the creature who lay here, warm, breathing deeply, Venus-like, was no more than a fragment of Brigitte, had died when Brigitte died, and was haunting his life merely because it fancied it was a separate entity possessing flesh and blood on its own account.

It seemed to be of the stuff from which the Bride of Corinth had been made, a compost of nightly shadows which would distintegrate and vanish in mist-wreaths as soon as day dawned.

The sleeping woman sighed deeply. Then the corners of her mouth contracted, as they so often did

now, almost as frequently as in the days when he had rescued her from her despair.

And was he to plunge her back into the abyss?

Could he thrust this beautiful, proud young creature who had entrusted her all to his tender care, who offered him her youth when he had nothing better to give than age and a fading renown, who would have to suffer at his hands precisely what she had suffered at the hands of that narrow-minded snob—could he thrust her out of his life as if she were something undesirable and obnoxious?

A crime! Inhuman!

Yet what could he do? Just as now she lay before him, a ghost from the days of his happiness, so she would always lie.

A shiver passed over him. As he contemplated her he came to realise that the hours of his love with Astrid were over, never to return.

He gently stroked her cheek and hair, bidding her a solemn farewell.

But she, turning in her sleep, took his hand in hers, smiling peacefully.

CHAPTER XL

Autumn had come, the first autumn without Brigitte.

A friend, speaking from experience, had said:

"The seasons must come and go, the year make its whole round, just once after the loss of a dear one; then the pain begins to grow less . . ."

For the moment, however, his grief knew no abatement.

He had held out exactly three days in Neuheide. No door could ever be pushed open without his thinking: "Now she will come in." As for the gamekeeper's lodge, he did not venture to go near it.

Luckily he had entrusted the placing of the panels to a competent man. No matter if the colours were a little too bright for the old room! The years would pass mellowing fingers over the work—and what were a few centuries more or less to the dead!

He had very little news of Astrid. She had come to realise that nothing would induce him to visit her at her home in Denmark. Though she wrote twice to him from there, she did not again refer to the scheme.

Now she had returned to Berlin, had thrown the doors of her establishment wide, was again entertaining lavishly.

True, Steffen's heart had leapt for joy when he

heard her dear voice over the telephone once more. Here, at last, was a prospect of breaking the spell of his solitude. Yet at the same instant the question arose in his mind: "Suppose your friendship should resume its old course?" The thought was intolerable.

He must have one good talk with her all the same. To evade it would be to dub himself a coward. So he wrote to her at great length, telling her all his thoughts, and shouldering the blame for his aloofness. "I know that I am a faithless wretch. I know that I am wilfully forgoing the possibilities of unheard-of happiness. But I feel that there is only one thing I can do now: love my dead. I'm no good for anything else."

Astrid's answer was full of dignified reticence. No word of reproach; nothing but proud renunciation, and a hope that, in a not too distant future, they might meet again as friends and nothing more.

"Come to me whenever you please. I shall not remind you of what has been between us by so much as a syllable or a look. Whether we are alone together or in mixed company, you will always find in me a friend who shares your sorrow and would give much to be able to alleviate it."

"That might have been written by Brigitte," he thought.

At their first meeting, he found her clear-eyed, and bubbling over with cheerful conversation. He refused to consider how much this might cost her.

He likewise went to one or two of her parties,

played at being the worldly courtier of fair women—to return home with a sardonic smile twisting his lips.

In this solitude, which was in truth spiritual quite as much as physical, he began to be tormented by a craving for woman, a craving which seemed to him unreasonable in a man of his years.

Yet nothing would induce him to turn to Astrid for solace. Should he ever venture to make her his again, he would be trespassing upon Brigitte's preserves. Nor could he contemplate approaching any of the women of Brigitte's acquaintance; had he done so he would have been disparaging her in her friends' eyes.

But Berlin was a big city. To the north and to the east there were vast areas, detached worlds into which no man of his social standing ever penetrated. If he entered into conversation with his young neighbour at the "pictures," and afterwards invited her to have a meal as a preliminary to spending the night together, or if, at a dancing hall he paid court to a belle, none of his friends would ever be the wiser.

Ever and ever again he was astonished to find that, in spite of his advancing years (he was nearing sixty), the young women did not seem to find him too old as a lover. Quite otherwise. His silvery locks appeared to tickle their fancy; and many a conquest might have been booked to him had he so desired.

Yet in the end he came to realise that what he

longed for was not simply woman as sexual counterpart. He wanted a comrade, a sister who would help him in his sore need—in a word, he wanted some one who would act as substitute for the lost Brigitte.

But, after all, there could be no substitute. He wanted more than that. He wanted Brigitte herself.

Brigitte herself; yes, Brigitte her very self.

He would surely find her somewhere, even if she were mouldering under the cold sod; somewhere an essence that was hers must exist, if only he could discover its whereabouts.

He must devote himself to the search for it, that was all. Fate could not but smile on him in the end!

Meanwhile, and until what alone could bring happiness stood palpably before him and smilingly reminded him that the "eternal recurrence of the similar" was no figment of the imagination, he must e'en be satisfied with what he could encounter at any street-corner.

Now it would be a sempstress who had lost her young man in the war, pouring into Steffen's ear the litany of her woes while stuffing her mouth with cream buns in the back room at a pastrycook's; at another time he would find himself with a widow, whose husband had not been able to weather the financial storms of the post-war period and had sought the easiest way out, a woman who was happy,

at the end of a walk together, if Steffen discreetly slipped a ten-mark note into her hand.

Fate sent many ships sailing by him at this time; some hailed him in passing, others drew up alongside for a while. And if, under cover of darkness, a loving hand would caress him lightly as Brigitte had been wont to do, it was well with him, and he felt somewhat comforted.

Nor was there any need for him to hide his sorrows, for, having bade farewell, he never saw these chance mistresses again. He kept his more intimate thoughts and feelings to himself; they were sacred and unutterable; but otherwise he let himself go, and would talk without end. These tirades were a solace to his aching heart.

No woman was too humble, none too trifling, to serve as a chalice for his ardours. They would listen sympathetically, whether they understood or not, and in the end he would feel closer to them than he would to those who formed the circle of his intimates.

Having said good-bye, he would feel his loneliness increased a hundredfold; and often, returning home to a darkened and silent house, he would sink on to a chair and weep bitterly.

One night as, half unconscious, he was kneeling before Brigitte's writing-table, he felt a gentle touch upon his shoulder, and heard a compassionate little voice saying:

"Master! Dear, dear Master!"

Ashamed at being surprised in his misery, for he was always careful that the servants should not guess the bitterness of his affliction, he jumped to his feet, and found Loni standing at his side. She was barefooted, and had thrown a white dressing jacket over her shoulders; her fair, curly hair was braided into two plaits which hung demurely down on either side of her innocent, angelic face.

She excused her intrusion, while all the time gulping down her sobs and trying to stop the flow of tears.

"I heard some one groaning and sighing," she explained, "and so I thought I'd better get up and see what was the matter. I am very very sorry to have been so forward, Sir, but I did not know what else to do. Dear Master, won't you go to bed now? You'll see, sleep will soon come, once you are cosy in bed."

He stared at her, his surprise depriving him of speech.

She was still no more than a little girl, though her son had been attending the secondary school some time now.

At last, very gently, he said:

"Thank you, Loni. I know how kind you mean to be, and I appreciate it greatly. But I beg you in future to take no notice of what I do. Each of us has his own sorrows to bear, and I must learn to bear mine alone. Good night."

She dropped a little curtsey. Yes, she bobbed a

curtsey, just as if she were a child! And yet her son was already entering his teens.

She disappeared into the dark passage, and closed the door behind her. Steffen gazed after her and at the place where she had stood.

"Here am I," he thought, "hunting the wide world for a sympathetic and loving heart, while all the time the very thing I want is ready for me in my own home!"

But Loni would not really supply his need! Her young soul dwelt in other realms than his. Were he to bring her into more intimate contact with his life, he would be doing her an injury; and for domesticity he now felt too weary. Besides, it would be a shame for an elderly man such as he to wed so young a creature; and even if he did, would not Brigitte's wraith cast a shadow over the union?

Better let things be as they were.

He resumed his nightly wanderings in search of chance amours, and from these he would return to the heavy sleep of utter exhaustion.

Next day he would set to work in his studio; but he laboured aimlessly and without any pleasure.

Yes, he still worked, from a sense of duty, from force of habit, and because he must have something to show Brigitte when, at last, she would return.

Ah, but she would never return! She was dead. "As dead as a doornail," he exclaimed, quoting Dickens, who had once been his idol.

It was not for nothing that her eyes had followed

his every creation for so many years. If he did not paint for her sake, for whose would he be painting?

Another series of reflections seemed to lead into the very jaws of hell. These thoughts would thrust in between him and his work, threatening to poison all his gentler feelings, to crush even the loving memories he now cherished of Brigitte.—But for her whom a crazy whim of fortune had shackled him to, everything would have been different!

He would have mounted the ladder of fame, unhampered by the cares of a household which he was forced to drag about with him wherever he went. His ascent would have continued steadily year after year, without a hitch, without a set-back, without a doubt to assail him. The fetters imposed by children would never have existed for him. He would have been a leader and a teacher of his generation, and of those which followed.

Instead of this, he was nothing but a mouldy remnant, shoved aside, almost totally ignored by the rising young artists of the day. He had passed over to the ranks of those who went about the world trailing clouds of imaginary fame behind them, an old-age pension, as it were, until death released them as it released all mankind.

What good had it done him to be cared for at all times by her, when she had, in return, needed so much of his care? How paralysing she had been, clipping his wings so that he grovelled in the dust his whole life long!

And yet he, too, was guilty; he, too, owed a debt to his dead love. Laughing, full of innocent joy in life, a being gifted with a wealth of creative fancy, a poet soul destined to the highest accomplishment, she had entered the orbit of his life, willing and eager to bring happiness to him.

What had he made of her?

A sickly, fretful creature, a shadow slinking away into dark corners; a being whose creative energies had gone to waste, whose personal dignity had been destroyed; a thing which, conscious only that it was tolerated, had been content to slouch along at his side, and one whose only reason for existence was that it was useful to him.

Two lives, mutually destroyed, mutally reduced to ashes, merely in order to sacrifice to the Moloch of convention.

A "happy" marriage, in the last analysis of that absurdity!

How could he bring all these distinguished and contradictory items within the bounds of a formula, so that he might appraise what had happened, and put it in the proper pigeon-hole?

Each thing by itself appeared to be genuine. And yet the contrary was true likewise.

All her life she had remained cheerful, and contented with her lot. And he? Had he not made the most of the opportunities which entered the circuit of his existence? Had he not worked with pleasure and ardour?

Why, then, his talk of stunting and of destruction?

And yet . . . One had merely to recall the past with its moods, and the truth became apparent.

Such self-communings were enough to send a man crazy! Deeper and deeper he sank into the quagmire of these brooding thoughts; his mind became emptier and emptier, absorbed as it was by this one sequence of ideas.

He must put an end to it all; put an end to it; otherwise he would sink irrevocably into the bog . . .

Thank God, he still had his work to do!

The Deluge was there, making insistent claims on his imagination and his energy.

"Get on with your job, Steffen, my lad! Here you have a test for your abilities."

Little of the erstwhile sketch was now to be seen. The "organ-pipes" had disappeared, the intertwined limbs had followed; the only thing he had preserved was the figure of the woman in the foreground, seeking to clutch her child, while the backwash of the surges was sweeping her away. Had he daubed her out too, there would have been no reason to continue working at the picture.

But this figure alone was not competent to represent "the deluge." He would have to recreate the tangle of human beings, would have to keep up the tragedy of the whole lest it lapse into sentimentality.

The old masters had known how to do such things, Lionardo, Orcagna, and many others. Why should

not he? Why should a glut of bodies seem to him so ludicrous?

Were he to compose his background with the same symmetrical parallelism which Michelangelo had successfully achieved in *The Last Judgment*, he would merely be falling into what, since the great master's day, had become academic mannerism. Yet the thought of again depicting a chaos of limbs revolted him, for this would have been a mere prentice trick.

One sketch followed upon the other. He ruthlessly cast them aside as inadequate.

He needed but to ask himself: "What would Brigitte have to say to that?" Instantly the newly conceived notion was doomed.

The cartoons which, during his long wakeful nights, he roughed in, amounted now to many dozens; not one of them seemed worth elaborating.

His irresolution grew from day to day.

Never before had he experienced anything like this, never had he felt his inventive faculty so sterile.

Hitherto Brigitte had always been there to cheer him with a smile, to banish doubt from his mind, to encourage him and put fresh backbone into his work.

"My Stephenson is so clever, he can do everything," she had been wont to say; and the words sufficed to carry him over the worst rapids.

"Brigitte! Where are you? Brigitte!"

The soundless cry went through the studio, day after day, ever more frequently.

One morning, after a few hours of troubled sleep, he suddenly found himself with aching head and trembling knees standing before the huge canvas, making every endeavour to convey to it the ideas which during the restless night had been seething in his head.

The brush well-nigh dropped from his fingers, so weary was he ere ever he had begun.

He managed to draw one line in sepia over the wet foundation; immediately he felt that a confused tangle of limbs was once more going to emerge; disgust overtook him; despair gripped him by the throat.

"You old fool," he cried. "You would like to pretend you are an ardent young man again, would like to bamboozle yourself into believing you are capable of fire and intoxication, you, who are nothing but a pitiful mummy, with reason to be glad if your own asthmatic breath does not blow you away."

The palette-knife lay handy.

Snick, snack; it zigzagged down the canvas, and huge pieces, like the petals of a mighty flower, curved round him on every side.

Steffen Tromholt's youthful masterpiece, which in its maturer form was to have been a subject of admiration to future generations, Steffen Tromholt's much prized *Deluge*, was a thing of the past!

CHAPTER XLI

HENCEFORWARD, he neglected his work.

This is not to say that he was lazy. One does not easily learn in old age to be something one has never been before.

Besides, there was always plenty of occupation. He had commissions for the illustrated papers, orders which in better days he had turned down, but which came in increasing abundance now he was willing to accept them. Portrait commissions, too, helped to remove any chance of financial stringency, for better times were following upon the lean years, and his name still commanded handsome fees.

He devoted more time to the Artists' Society, whose chairman he had been for a couple of decades, going assiduously to the meetings of the committee and dealing with the vast correspondence which had ensued upon the re-quickening of the old association.

Yet nothing of all this activity could compensate for the loss of the kingdom of freely creative art. The hours crept along on leaden feet, and each one of them was pregnant with reproach. In fact, self-reproach was the main content of this weary existence, which lagged superfluous on the stage.

Ever more frequently he was urged by an inward monitor to make an end of it all.

The thing he had hinted at a few weeks before

Brigitte's death, when they were having that memorable talk together and which at the time was no more than a vague premonition, the thing which had loomed very near during the night when he kept vigil by her open coffin, to be thrust into the background again when his vital energies returned, the thought of following her of his own free will into the tomb, had now come more and more to present itself to him as the only possible release from his present plight.

"Yes, that's it; make an end of it all! So long as Brigitte was alive, the world was tolerable; now it is worth a bullet, and nothing more."

Astrid had disappeared into the void. The friendship they had tried to keep up after so many intoxicating hours had proved a hollow sham. The knowledge of their lost happiness lay like a blight upon their every meeting, and frequently it happened that she would abruptly leave the room, to appear after a while, her eyes and cheeks showing the traces of tears in spite of liberal ablutions.

Hardly had spring returned, before she left Berlin, to roam about the shores of the Mediterranean until her house in her Danish homeland should become habitable once again. One day, when fate led him by her flat, Steffen found pantechnicons being loaded in the street below, and recognised a well-known piece of furniture as it was being carried across the pavement.

So she was shaking the dust of Berlin off her feet!

Oh, well, she had by now become so much of a stranger, that he felt hardly any regret at all. But the pang he experienced whenever he thought of Astrid was a little stronger than usual. Interpreted in words, this feeling would be:

"Another shipwreck on your conscience!"

He'd have to make the best of that.

Brigitte, living, might well put up with Astrid's presence; Brigitte, dead, could not be affronted by giving her a rival!

One piece of life crumbled away, and then another.

Friends had long since withdrawn from the orbit of his existence; Reginald Naschke alone spoke to him occasionally of business matters. Once the sometime picture-dealer had exclaimed:

"I shan't say another word. You want things to be thus and thus—so they'll just have to be as you think best. But if you'll take my advice, you'll not go on tampering with yourself. Things'll take their revenge on you, mark my words. Then it's usually too late."

Isenberg shook hands with Steffen, if the two happened to meet; but Maxel and he had not even kept up the outward forms of friendship.

Maxel had once found fault with Steffen for a lack of moderation in his mourning, thereupon Steffen had retorted:

"You tried for many years to break up my married life. As a mark of gratitude, Brigitte was instru-

mental in cementing yours. It seems to me about time you left my wife in peace—and myself, likewise."

A breach was inevitable after such words; and as far as Steffen was concerned this rupture of an old friendship was a matter of complete indifference.

Away with Maxel! Away with them all! Away with everything to which at one time he had been attached!

In the end he even resigned his chairmanship of the Artists' Society.

His colleagues on the committee were greatly perturbed, for his competent leadership had rendered their task an easy one.

They endeavoured by every means in their power to make him reconsider his decision, but in vain, so they determined that his retirement should at any rate redound to the honour and glory of the institution.

They would hold an exhibition of his life's work, an exhibition on the grand scale, such as usually took place only after the death of a great artist, or as a jubilee in honour of some old warrior in the field of art.

The National Gallery had been rather cool so far as his work was concerned; so they did not approach the curator. But at the Crystal Palace opposite the Lehrter Station there was room and to spare. The mandarins of the art world would have no title to

interfere; and as for overt or tacit envy, that could surely be silenced by a reference to Steffen Tromholt's services to art—at least so far as fellow members of the society were concerned.

A few days before Christmas, three members of the committee presented themselves at his house in order to communicate the resolution that had been come to, and to ask for his co-operation in the preparations, for he alone was competent to assemble the materials for such an exhibition.

Not having the remotest idea as to the reason for their call, Steffen was furious at the interruption, and did not so much as invite them into the studio, as is customary with fellow artists. Instead, he had them shown into Brigitte's deserted realm.

The leader of the deputation explained the scheme, which, he said, was to be a kind of Christmas present from the society to its honoured colleague. A sense of immense well-being, almost animal in its intensity, swept over Steffen as he listened; but all too soon it changed into a feeling of scorn and bitterness, as he thought:

"But what's the use of it all? I have no strength left even to rejoice at my good fortune! My life's work has come to naught."

It was not until he recalled Brigitte's enthusiasm at such a prospect as now presented itself, that peace returned to his soul, and he was able to express thanks adequate to the greatness of the gift his colleagues

were offering him. Nor did the delegation doubt for a moment that they had been dispensers of superlative happiness.

In actual fact, it was so! Do what he would, he could not stifle the feeling of elation that henceforward possessed him.

Always and always he caught himself thinking: "Oh, how delighted she would have been. She should have lived to see this day!"

When Christmas Eve dawned, he determined to pay a visit to her grave and tell her the glad tidings.

He had carefully avoided going on such a pilgrimage the previous Christmas, for he knew that he was not then strong enough to live through an experience of the kind.

Now that another year had gone by, the conventional period of mourning had elapsed, and he might hope to master his grief.

There was no longer any merry-making at this season in his house. Such rejoicings would have had no meaning in Brigitte's absence. Yet when Loni asked him if she might have a Christmas-tree for her boy—the cook had long since been let into the secret of Loni's motherhood—he could not say her nay. One thing he stipulated, however: he was not to see or hear anything of the matter, and he went out early in the afternoon. He had planned a Christmas Eve celebration of his own!

He bought a Christmas-tree at the nearest florist's, a little one, not more than two feet high. A tiny tree,

such as Brigitte had been wont to give the children on the first Sunday in Advent, as a foretaste of joys to come. This he took with him to the cemetery.

The place was emptier than he had hoped to find it. Only here and there a shadow slunk past him in the bare alley-ways.

By the time he reached her grave—his grave—night was approaching.

He could still faintly make out the gold lettering on the obelisk crowning the mound. It was flanked by two cypresses about the height of a man, and Loni had laid an armful of roses among the dark and wintry branches. Since the weather was mild and misty, he knew that Brigitte's resting-place would wear a festive air over the holidays.

Now he added his tiny Christmas-tree to the decorations. He planted it deep in the soft mould, so that the wind should not buffet it.

Then he fixed candles on the branches, and endeavoured to light it up. Yet, though the evening was calm, each time a little flame sprang up, a gentle sighing seemed to stir among the pine needles, and the spark died out.

He grew obstinate, and tried again and again, but in the end he became convinced that fate meant to deprive him even of this joy, the only one that remained to him on earth.

Obstinacy turned to despair. Under the cold sod lay everything that had ever belonged to him; and he could do no further kindness to her who rested

below, any more than she could be kind to him above ground.

She had taken the only revenge it was in her power to take.

Soon it would be two years since she had left him, and his grief was as poignant as ever. Never would he find alleviation; he was sure of that now. Nor would he ever be able to regulate his life again satisfactorily.

Why play any longer with the thought; everything pointed to one possibility as the way out. What need to procrastinate?

But he had come here to tell her something! What could it be? Surely something that would please her?

Ah, yes! It was about the exhibition. That was what he had intended to give her as a Christmas present.

A man could talk of matters up here that could not be heard down below under the sod.

One last hope remained: dust unto dust, community of the shades, common clay. What matter that he had once scoffed at the idea?

Still, he had much to do up here, all the same. Without his co-operation the scheme could not be carried out in its entirety. He'd have to go through a lot of papers, look up addresses, write letters begging for the loan of his pictures. In a word, he would have to toil day in day out if the exhibition was to prove a success.

Then, when the work was completed, when the walls, from floor to ceiling, were covered with pictures, silent witnesses of a life—whether in fair days or foul—devoted to his art, to labour . . .

Then, at last, his day of rest would come, the day he had, consciously and unconsciously, been yearning for so long.

In right good earnest! He would not bear his burden for a single night after that.

He knelt by the grave-side, pressing his face against the little tree, and solemnly vowing to his beloved dead that he would follow her to the tomb on the very day when his life's work lay spread, complete, before him.

He was no longer concerned to know what the world thought of his achievement, nor did he care to reckon up its worth. If time, in its speedy flight, cast the whole of it aside, if he himself looked upon it as a witness of his own progressive decay, death would compensate and bring him the contentment of forgetfulness.

Steffen rose to his feet, swaying slightly and casting a wild glance around him.

Not far from where he stood was a monument showing the figure of a woman, leaning against the back of the tombstone within the square-fenced precinct. A ray of light from a neighbouring lamp fell upon her visage, while all else was shrouded in darkness.

She seemed a herald from Brigitte's realm, and smiled down at him from on high.

Or was it Brigitte herself who had chosen this statue as a vehicle for her embodiment?

"I come, I come, Brigitte," he cried, amid tempestuous tears, and stretching his arms towards the stone image.

He heard a slight rustling noise from behind the cypresses, and it conveyed an impression of reproof to him as he stood. Another visitor to the cemetery, without a doubt, who had been annoyed at his want of self-control. He stole softly away as if he had been caught committing a crime.

No less quietly, he glided by Atta's room when he had reached his home, and, as he passed, he heard cheerful sounds, for here were Loni and her boy holding modest festival. Laughter and joyousness came to him through the closed door.

He threw himself on his bed in the dark, and dozed off into a land of dreams where Brigitte, after arranging the Christmas gifts and lighting up the tree, happy at the happiness that was in store for her dear ones, was ringing the bell which gave the signal that all was ready and the household might come in.

Even the saddest of Christmases comes to an end at last, and ordinary life resumes its sway.

Steffen Tromholt's days were now filled with activity, since he had to make preparations for his final departure.

He was surrounded on all hands by half-finished works, crying out for completion; and when he began to investigate what had accumulated in those store-cupboards under the roof, he found that there was no end to the stuff that had been thrust away there and forgotten.

Now he must reconsider all these canvases from the viewpoint of the exhibition, must prepare those that were suitable, must get them framed. He had his work cut out for years to come if this was to be done properly; whereas, at the highest reckoning, he could be granted no more than four months' delay!

Some of the things were really worth giving a little trouble to. There was, for instance, a triptych illustrating the Hercules and Deianeira myth. He had started on it full of enthusiasm, just as he had with *The Deluge*, as a derivative for his rage over his unfortunate marriage. But when, at Brigitte's first glance, he realised that she had read its underlying significance, he had not had the heart to continue the work. The only detail he had finished was the face of the hero. The young wife was looking up at him in all her beauty; and since Deianeira's tragical deed had been done in perfect love, Steffen felt that his dead Brigitte would not be affronted if he reincarnated her in this woman now.

But how would he ever find time to do what was needed to complete the picture? The committee was sending him urgent appeals day by day to press on with the preparations for the exhibition.

There were cases and boxes of papers he must look through and set in order. True, a good deal of it was lumber, fit only for the flames; but there were other documents which were worth keeping since they related to the history of art, and had been penned by persons of note. Brigitte's letters, too, must not be destroyed. And there was a mass of material, besides, which he knew Atta would treasure.

What a lot there was to occupy him! As the winter advanced so, too, did his activity. He was as it were in a frenzy which outwardly appeared to be an increase in the joy of life, whereas it was in reality nothing other than the fever of farewell.

The first heralds of spring were already come. Beneath Brigitte's Christmas-tree the snowdrops were blooming, and the sun streamed into the empty rooms of Steffen's home as if it were impatient for another lady to preside over the tea table.

Steffen scorned the lure of the great renewal out of doors. He was indifferent to its advent; it was not even capable of troubling his equanimity now.

While he, preoccupied, busied himself in the studio, Loni's voice raised in song would float in upon him, filling the great room with irrational mirth.

He was sorry for Loni. During these last few years she had developed into a clever and sympathetic young creature. Brigitte's tutelage and the girl's own common sense since her mistress's death, had made of her a lass who was far above the station of an ordinary domestic. He had not forgotten her

in his will, nor her son either; and yet he felt sure she would sink back into the working class as soon as she was set adrift in the world by his death.

Perhaps he could get Atta to be interested in her? Where was Atta? Immensely far away! Not only did miles upon miles of earth and sea divide them; she lived a life of her own, apart from him, the only link between father and daughter being letters exchanged at long intervals. She had never forfeited her place in his affections; he thought tenderly of her, were it only for Brigitte's sake. Nevertheless he was alone, quite alone in the world; there was no one now for whom he need remain.

By the beginning of April, his preparations were completed. His will was signed and attested; his papers were sorted, and his life was henceforward a closed book to the Paul Prys of the future!

The time that remained on his hands was to be devoted to putting the final touches to the few pictures that were still unfinished. Now he brought this one out and placed it on the easel, now that other one, touching them up as his fancy moved him. Models came when he needed their services. The one thing he dared not alter was Deianeira's face, for it was the face of Brigitte.

His soul was filled with mournful serenity. Ever renewed, the cry rose within him: "Enough! Enough of this life!"

Oh, that he had not been forced to delay his de-

parture so long! The slow passage of the days was torture! He craved for the end.

And yet he had mixed feelings!

Anxiety oozed from every pore, as he thought: "Is death the end?" Not that he was alarmed at the prospect of extinction. What troubled him was the dread of "not having accomplished anything," the fear of "not having given of his immortal essence to the world."

Such fits passed, however; and the sad joy at the prospect of being able to rest resumed its sway.

Brigitte's image was ever before his eyes. He held lengthy conversations with her; accused himself and her, and justified both himself and her.

Even if marriage had been a thousandfold guilty of having spoiled his life, it would have been the callous deed of a murderer to ascribe all the evil to the woman who had sacrificed everything on his behalf.

He had reached the bounds of human strength and capacity; should he step over the frontier line, he would find himself in the realm of impotence to which a pusillanimous world had given the name of "fate."

Therefore it would be best to bow his head in humility, confronted as he was by "never to be changed circumstances," and to come to terms with his misshapen life by turning his back upon it.

Two weeks only separated him from the day of accomplishment.

Now the hanging committee came to request him to supervise the placing of his pictures. There were so many canvases it seemed barely possible to find space for them all. A selection must be made, and he alone was competent to do it.

Steffen's answer ran: "Do just what you think best. I shall not set a foot in the exhibition till you have finished everything to your own satisfaction."

Whereupon the committee rejoined: "We could not venture to decide, among so many masterpieces, which should be left unexhibited. We have, therefore, resolved to add another room to the exhibition, and we trust you will feel satisfied with this way out of the difficulty."

Steffen laughed, and let them have their way. Flattering in the extreme; yet what did he care now? No expert's judgment could alter his own estimate of his work.

Three days before the opening, he received the following letter from his successor in office: "I and my fellow committeemen feel that, before the exhibition is thrown open to the public, you should yourself view the whole. I beg you, therefore, to come to-morrow afternoon at four. You will be received by your colleagues and friends before the main doors of the Crystal Palace, and be escorted round."

His heart gave a bound.

The hour of fulfilment had struck earlier than he had expected. It seemed to him he had an endless amount of things still to do. Yet everything had

already been done! Letters of farewell lay before him on the table. His will was in order. There was not a person in the world to whom he felt himself a debtor.

Excepting always Astrid!

But Astrid herself was so deeply involved in the tragedy; too deeply involved ever to reproach him. She might have had reason to do so if he had linked his life with another woman in real earnest, or if he had led a jolly and blithe existence during the two intervening years. As things were, she would be able to look back on their intimacy with friendliness.

Thus was his leave-taking phrased in the letter which lay with the others, making a little white heap of envelopes, on the left-hand corner of his writing-table. Now her image could be effaced from his memory, for every thought henceforward belonged to Brigitte alone.

Night came. The last he was to spend on earth. He slept peacefully and dreamed pleasant dreams.

Yet, on arising, he became aware of a weight on his spirits, a weight similar to the one which had lain so heavily upon him that night he had passed with Brigitte rigid in her coffin.

Only a few more hours, and he would be with her for all eternity.

As soon as the little ceremony was over, and he had passed in review the labours of a lifetime, then—oh, it had been long ago resolved—he would go to the cemetery, and, upon Brigitte's resting-place,

which was to be his resting-place likewise, make an end of himself.

The spring had rushed forward with spendthrift exuberance, so that one might have thought Whitsuntide was already in the land. Green was the earth, and the leaves that still remained in bud were undergoing a visible expansion as the warm days hurried by. Finches were full of bustle and noise in the road before the house, and a blackbird was piping for all he was worth from the weather vane.

Steffen looked on and listened, and every time his heart threatened to grow heavy at the prospect of imminent death, he needed but to think of Brigitte, who no longer could see or hear anything, and once more he would be fortified in his determination.

Slowly for him the day dragged on. He had nothing further to do.

Before starting off, he thrust his revolver in his pocket. He had made it ready for the great event weeks and weeks ago. It was the same weapon whose cold steel had brought sleep to his aching eyelids long before.

Loni came to enquire whether Master was to be home late, and whether he'd like to take a sandwich with him.

"Thank you, child, for everything you have done for me," he said, taking her head between his hands and kissing her on the forehead.

As he betook himself off, he was aware that she had flushed a deep scarlet and was gazing after him

in obvious agitation. Never before had Master done such a thing to her; never before!

"She is the only creature left to me," he mused; and, as certain clauses in his will flashed through his mind, he said: "How absurd to think one can ever repay so much kindness!"

He cast a look up at the windows when he reached the street. From those over there, Brigitte had often and often waved a farewell greeting! He set forth on his last journey.

Yet no; his last walk was to lead him direct to Brigitte.

Here now was a dark mass alleviated by patches of light where bouquets and spring dresses formed a pretty mosaic: men and women awaiting his arrival.

There was a raising of hats; they were welcoming him. The man who had stepped into his shoes as chairman whispered hurriedly in his ear:

"Come inside. We want to give you a rousing reception there."

The new chairman strode along beside him, leading him from room to room, still full of workmen, hammering, painting, talking, as they gave the finishing touches to their work. Some of them bowed to him with awkward courtesy, others merely stared at him; all, however, seemed to realise that they were watching a great man pass. The little crowd of private viewers followed in his wake.

They came to a halt at length in front of a reddish-brown plush curtain. The chairman of the

Artists' Society cast a glance over the assembled friends, missing a face here and there. Doubtless they had lingered on the way to look at some work that was less well known to them.

Suddenly Tromholt was aware that a growing sense of anxiety was rising within him.

Up till now he had lent himself to everything, animated partly by kindliness for all this trouble on his account, and partly in bitterness of spirit, bewitched as it were by a craving for death. Now, quite abruptly, he realised the monstrous thing to which he had become a party.

Why had he not stayed quietly at home? They could have paid their respects to him from a distance. How could he bear this fresh torture of looking upon works whose value he prized so low?

Besides, seeing that he was so soon to die—and he was resolved to die, God knew the truth of that!—what had all this business to do with him?

A voice screamed in his ear:

"Go home!"

But that would have been a silly trick to play, now . . . Here came the stragglers at last!

The curtain rolled back; the little company entered, and the curtain closed behind them.

Steffen saw hands outstretched; all were pressing his hand, all were shaking him by the hand. A half circle had automatically formed around him, cutting him off from his pictures, which seemed to fill room after room in endless procession.

The incoming chairman cleared his throat, and as he delivered his inaugural address—an oration such as one usually was treated to at funerals only—Steffen's gaze wandered over the heads of the assembly, and feverishly travelled along the walls.

But everything seemed to dance before him; he could see nothing but spots of colour, framed in gold. Nowhere could his eyes find rest; nowhere could he find a familiar canvas.

Purblind he was, gazing into the distance.

Then, while trying to evade the phantasmagoria before him, he glanced to the right, and, lo, here was something charming, something he had loved long ago and which had this many a year become a stranger to him.

It was his *Battle in Winter*, a picture he had not seen since youth.

At the same instant, he heard Brigitte's voice, heard the very words she had uttered concerning this work, when the two of them—they were not betrothed then—were walking through the wood near the sea-shore.

Strange! Almost incredible! Every word was as fresh now as the day it had been uttered:

"The wounded, friend and foe, crawling together for warmth; endeavouring to light a fire which the storm extinguishes; a badly injured Prussian holding a dying Austrian in his arms, trying to warm the latter's freezing hands with his breath."

Yes; those were her words, her very words! Her

very words! She had been deeply moved by the picture long before the paths of their lives had converged. And yet she had never beheld the original; she had seen no more than an engraved reproduction.

He felt the tears rushing to his eyes. How was he to hide them? Flight? Impossible! No means of getting away at all.

The speaker imagines that the man in whose honour the ceremony is being held is moved by the eloquence of the inaugural oration. Since emotion is contagious, the worthy fellow pulls out a handkerchief and blows his nose sonorously and shamelessly.

Other handkerchiefs appear upon the scene, and an aroma of Chypre and Quelques Fleurs pervades the atmosphere, wafting an oblation heavenward.

The orator, in his closing words, inveighs against the young revolutionaries of art; then there is a general handshaking. The ladies offer their nosegays to Steffen, and, since there are too many for him to accommodate in his arms, they are confided to an attendant who is to keep watch and ward over them until further notice.

Steffen pronounces a few words of grateful thanks, and directly afterwards the visitors start their round of inspection.

Picture after picture, room after room, every foot of wall-space covered from floor to ceiling, leaving hardly a finger's breadth between the frames. Steffen asked himself:

"Can I really have done all this?"

Again everything began to dance before his eyes, even worse than before, so that he was afraid lest he should lose consciousness. At length he stammered:

"Might I—sit—down—a moment?"

Every one was feeling deeply sympathetic towards him. The joy they were instrumental in bringing him was far too great for any mortal wight to experience with perfect self-control!

They led him to a chair, and spoke words of comfort softly in his ear:

"That's right. Take a little rest. We'd feel just the same. We just want to show one or two more pictures to the ladies, and then we'll vanish noiselessly and leave you to yourself."

Again there were a dozen or so hands to shake. Then he was alone.

Alone with Brigitte.

For her spirit hovered over all.

The more he was able to pull himself together, the more he was able to look at this picture and the other, the more conscious did he become of her living presence. The very soul of her seemed to stand before him.

No longer was his sensation a mere figment of the imagination. She was standing by him, she smiled at him, she spoke to him; and every word she spoke found an echo in his heart and was pregnant with meaning.

She had always been an adept at bestowing praise; for he needed praise, and she knew that well. Praise was to him like a shower in autumn falling on the seed. When she had blame to impart, it was so cleverly concealed in the form of hesitant questions and tentative looks, that he could never feel aggrieved. On the contrary, she provided him with matter for reflection, so that of his own accord he would come to the conclusion that this or the other mistake must be rectified.

Now, when he got on his feet again, and began his slow investigation of his own work, she walked by his side.

Such and such words she had uttered concerning this picture and that picture; each had been conceived in some special way because her eye had rested on it, because a word from her had blessed it.

Ah, there was *The Miracle of Spring*. Even *The Miracle of Spring* was there!

And he recalled that evening in Venice when she sat on the edge of the bed, and revealed to him the inner significance of his own work.

There, too, was the autumn landscape which he had painted in defiant mood soon after his marriage. He remembered her questioning look as he showed it to her, and how he had instantly realised that he could not play hanky-panky with his art so long as she was there to act as guardian.

All the series of the years gazed down at him from the walls.

Had his work fallen off? No, no, indeed! Quite otherwise. If art depends for its inwardness upon craftsmanship, here was craftsmanship and to spare!

To-day as he contemplated all he had achieved, looking at it with the unprejudiced eyes of a connoisseur, he might permit himself a judgment as if this were the work of a stranger.

And what was his judgment? Without being a prey to self-deception or to inordinate pride, he felt he had a right to congratulation. Had this been the exhibition of a fellow artist's work, he could have done no otherwise than shake his colleague by the hand.

Now he caught sight of *The Bathing Beach*, and now a study of some flowers leapt upon his vision. He had done those just before the outbreak of the war.

Flowers had never been his forte. "Fancy me being able to paint them like that!" Really, quite well done. Not bad at all. Maybe a shade too realistic—but then that was the manner of the time.

And the picture of those people splashing about in the breakers. He had merely done the thing to fix a passing impression.

But if he had been able to do that, maybe he had been ill-advised to destroy *The Deluge?* With his newly-won technique and more recent experience, perhaps he could have made a success of it after all.

Yes, but had his technique improved? If it had, what marvels might not even now be expected of him?

In that case his pusillanimity had been abject and idiotic; fate had not sent him headlong to ruin. All his tribulations, all his sorrows, had perhaps merely served to strengthen the artist in him: and Brigitte, Brigitte had not only *wished* to prove a blessing to his life, she had really *been* a blessing all the time!

His blessing, his star, his muse!

How often he had spoken of her as his muse; but always in mockery and derision! Now it would appear that she had quite as much claim to the designation as if she were a being descended from the clouds, everlastingly radiant with beauty, and not just his household drudge, compassionately loved and tolerated.

Ah, don't weep, old man, whatever you do! Don't let your knees give way beneath you.

There, at the exit, stood the attendant, still true to his watch over the flowers.

Flowers? Of course! They belonged by rights to her; they belonged on her grave.

For him, too, the right place was kneeling by her grave.

Not to die! No. But to throw himself upon it, to press his face in the soft earth, and to weep, weep, weep; to weep the very heart out of his body in happiness, in gratitude, and in love.

What mattered his vow that to-day he would follow her into the tomb? If she knew, she would laugh at him indulgently, saying:

"My foolish old Steffen! My darling!"

How good the words would sound.

At that moment, with lightning speed, he came to a resolve: He would take Loni's boy—Brigitte's grandson—to live with him, would bring the lad up as his own. Thereby Loni would automatically become his daughter, would become part of his family, and he would no longer be alone in the world.

Perhaps Atta would come back some day.

In any case, there was work still to be done. Deianeira had Brigitte's cast of countenance; that would be the first picture to finish.

Much might follow in its wake.

Over everything he did, Brigitte would be watching, now, as she had during her lifetime.

Smiling through all her troubles, humbled, tolerated, deceived and betrayed—she had always been the victress.

Thus, in the end, Steffen Tromholt's wife, hidden away in the tomb, was victorious over Death himself!

THE END

NAZARETH COLLEGE OF ROCHESTER
3 2769 01 229 265